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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SCHOOLING AND THE DILEMMA OF DIFFERENCE: LEARNING DISABILITY AS PHARMAKON

BY

RILLAH SHERIDAN CARSON ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

Edmonton, Alberta

FALL, 1995

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled SCHOOLING AND THE DILEMMA OF DIFFERENCE: LEARNING DISABILITY AS PHARMAKON submitted by Rillah Sheridan Carson in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

The term learning disability is a term used in education to designate those students who experience failure in school, but whose failure cannot be accounted for by any obvious intellectual, emotional, environmental or sensory difficulty. Learning disability first appeared on the educational landscape during the 1960s and has since rapidly come into common use in North American schools as an educational psychological discourse oriented towards the diagnosis and remediation of students. This widespread adoption of the term has happened despite the fact that learning disability is generally acknowledged to be an "elusive concept" and a "polymorphous category."

This study investigates the influence of learning disability discourse on school curriculum and classroom practice. As a researcher who is guided by pedagogical interests my concern has been to interpret the effects of this discourse regime, and to question the transformation of learning differences into learning disability.

The research employs Gadamer's model of the hermeneutic conversation to engage three teachers of learning disabled students in discussions about their practice. The conversational text is interpreted employing the frameworks of ontological and radical hermeneutics. Using the metaphor of the *pharmakon*, the study concludes that the designation of learning disability has been both beneficial and harmful to students experiencing difficulty in schools. Just as the pharmakon holds within it the possibility of both "remedy" and "poison" so too is this ambiguity present in the socially constructed phenomenon of learning disability.

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Behind this study, there has been the support and help of many people. To them, I would like to express my sincere gratitude.

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I was also fortunate to have Professor Nancy Gregg as the external examiner of the study. I thank Dr. Gregg for her careful and insightful review. Her thoughtful remarks have prompted me to re-examine the broad area of "metacognitive instruction" which I may have glossed over in the study.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the cooperation and involvement of the three teacher-participants. A sincere thank-you to "Lynne", "Karen" and "Vanore" who gave me a richer understanding of, and renewed respect for, teachers who work with special needs students.

Over the course of the study I was given encouragement and support from a great many relatives, colleagues and friends. Thanks to all of you, especially my mother.

Without the love and support of my family, I would not have been able to complete this study. To my husband, Terry -- who was never-failing in his belief that I would finish the dissertation, and furthermore, that I would be proud of the result -- I owe more than I can express in these acknowledgements. I thank also Sarah and Richard, my children, who have been patient and steadfast in their support of me over the years.

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Chapter One

Learning Disability in Question

The Definition of Learning Disability according to the Canadian Association for Children with Learning Disabilities

> Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders due to identifiable or inferred central nervous system dysfunction. Such disorders may be manifested by delays in early development and/or difficulties in any of the following areas: attention, memory, reasoning, coordination, competence, and emotional maturation. Learning disabilities are intrinsic to the individual, and may affect learning and behaviour in any individual, including those with potentially average, average or above average intelligence. Learning disabilities are not due primarily to visual, hearing, or motor handicaps; to mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or environmental disadvantage; although they may occur concurrently with any of these. Learning disabilities may arise from genetic variations, biochemical factors, events in the pre- to peri-natal period, or any other subsequent events resulting in neurological impairment. (Policy manual of the Canadian Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, 1986)

Opening to the Question

> We are now witnessing the breakdown of the two ideas that have constituted modernity since its birth: the vision of time as a linear, progressive succession toward a better future, and the notion of change as the best form of time's succession. (Paz, 1990, p. 3)

The time in which we live has been called "postmodern" (Lyotard, 1992; Borgmann, 1992), that is to say, "that which comes after modernity." However, more than a trend that is chronologically defined, postmodernism is a reply to modernist ideas of universal progressive technology, scientific mastery and a single world view. Postmodernism attempts to challenge certain modernist notions which assume that nature can "be thoroughly understood and eventually brought under control by means of the systematic development of

scientific knowledge through observation, experiment and rational thought" (Bohm, 1992, p. 383). Rejecting the idea of universal progress, postmodernism acknowledges that although change undoubtedly occurs, such change is not always synonymous with progress. It is the notion of technological advancement in certain areas of special education being equated with social progress that I wish to explore in this study. More specifically, this thesis is a hermeneutic inquiry into the meaning of learning disability (LD) -- how it came into being in North America, why it exists, the ways it has evolved and how it affects our daily lives. This foregrounding of the historical, social and ideological contexts provides an alternative view to the dominant empirical-analytic discourse in learning disability which presently exists.

To ask, "what is the meaning of learning disability?" in a hermeneutical sense is to accept that learning disability has become part of our cultural traditions. And if we are to inquire into the meaning of learning disability we must then turn towards the past, our traditions and our language which connect us to the world. According to Gadamer, we belong to our tradition, language and history before they belong to us (Bernstein, 1983, p. 130).

To ask a question is to be unsettled in one's mind about certain issues. It is wondering what to think and how to act in an ethical and meaningful fashion within our families, communities and the world in general. The questions that pursue us, then, are grounded in the social, historical and ideological milieu in which we find ourselves. We reside within cultures which by their very nature give rise to certain essential questions. Therefore, the question we ask is not exclusively our own. It is a natural response to the common difficulties and dissatisfactions of contemporary life.

The Personal Site

Hermeneutic questioning begins from a personal situational standpoint. Attempting to make explicit the personal reasons for pursuing a particular question is, therefore, an important part of the research process. It is important because it helps us become more fully aware of our values, beliefs and prejudices. This heightened awareness of ourselves also allows us to listen more attentively to the voices which surround and inform the research question. I am aware that some of the reasons for inquiring into the meaning of learning disability are closely related to my experiences as a teacher and as a mother.

During my 25 years as a teacher, I have taught or have known many students who have been called learning disabled. However, I have not really found the classification of certain students as learning disabled that helpful to me in my pedagogical encounters with such children, nor have I felt better informed about the problem learners who failed to meet LD criteria.

For six of those 25 years of teaching experience I worked as a reading supervisor in a rural school board in Newfoundland. During this time many students were referred to me as suspected disabled learners. My expertise was called for to confirm these initial diagnoses. Because I was trained as a reading specialist, it was assumed that I had the knowledge and expertise to make such pronouncements about these children -- children who were essentially strangers to me and I to them. I was never comfortable with this situation. It bothered me to write up diagnostic reports, prescribe remediation techniques, and essentially make judgements about a child's normalcy. I felt that the students were being lost in a maze of standardized tests, psychologists' reports and reading assessments.

Some years later I found myself teaching language arts in a trades and services high school in a large urban school. Here, all of the students were

experiencing difficulty in the academic subjects. Around the same time, my young daughter began to have trouble in school. Concern at that time about my students and my daughter prompted me to write the following short story.

Searching for Barbara

Ours is sort of a last chance school. It is intended for those students experiencing difficulty with the demands of the conventional school system. If a student doesn't make it here, there is really no where else for her to go.

Occasionally I meet a child who is more troubled than the rest, one whose difficulties appear especially profound. Concerned that the student meet with some measure of success in school and frustrated with my lack of resourcefulness, I often resort to the cumulative record file for some direction.

Barbara Cameron[1] was such a student. I decided to read her cumulative record. I became disturbed with what I found there. Perhaps it was the accumulative effect of knowing, teaching and caring for these students for so many years. Perhaps it was my disillusionment with the school system. Perhaps this particular file was more offensive than the others. I really don't know. The following extracts from Barbara's cumulative file may help express my concern.

CAMERON, BARBARA --4.11.71

- age 6, experiencing difficulty with reading and math; identified as dyslexic; minimal brain dysfunction suspected.

- age 8, repeating grade three; further identified as learning disabled; problems with visual perception; I.Q. is within normal range.

- age 13, recommending a pre-vocational route for grade seven; severe language disorder; emotionally unstable; counselling is needed.

- age 17, special placement in modified high school program is advised -- meets low verbal I.Q. stipulation; history of school discipline problems; homebound four months in grade nine; Barbara's social worker, parole officer, reading clinician and psychologist to meet monthly with school personnel to monitor her progress.

I found these extracts from Barbara Cameron's cumulative record file disquieting, as was the entire 114 page file itself. My reading became all the more unsettled when a photograph of a young freckle-faced girl with twin ponytails grinned up at me as it tumbled out of the file. The picture of Barbara was taken in her kindergarten year, shortly before she was identified as a learning disabled child ten years ago.

The Barbara I'm teaching now is seventeen and still labelled as learning disabled. But she's too street wise to be considered cute anymore and too scared of the future to quit the schools she has come to hate. In my naïvete, I had opened the file hoping to find out more about

[1] a pseudonym

> Barbara. I wasn't prepared for how little I found. Where was she in this mass of standardized tests, psychologists' reports, clinical reading assessments, information communiques and performance records? Alienated from her own experiences and appropriated by the school system as a learning disabled child, she had lost all identity. Her future seemed almost too dismal to even contemplate.
>
> I turned away from this unauthorized biography of Barbara Cameron and walked back upstairs to my classroom. I left the file behind and all that it contained, deciding I had to get to know Barbara my own way.

Shortly after I wrote this story my husband and I decided to enrol our daughter in a pilot learning disability program in the city. This was not an easy choice. In some ways it was an opportunistic move on our parts. I was, and remain, skeptical about a specific condition called learning disability but a concern for the most beneficial placement for my daughter pushed my doubts aside. Here in the LD program was an excellent special education teacher, a full-time aide and a class of only ten students. She would be allowed to remain in the program for two years, the hope being that these two years of intervention would allow a child to re-enter the regular program and to subsequently experience success there.

Our daughter attended the learning disability class for two years and graduated from junior high school six years after that when she was 15 years old, one year older than most of her peers. During her junior high school years, she received as much remediation as the school could afford but extra funding for the LD program was not available to her. Without a doubt, her academic skills improved over her nine-year school career. She was fortunate enough to have had well-qualified teachers and competent school administrators over the years. But her academic record is still spotty. The difficulties she had as a child of six still remain now that she is an adolescent.

Six years after she completed the junior LD program, she again had the opportunity to enrol in an LD program in a district high school. This time, however, with our support and encouragement, she decided to attend a different high

school where there was no provision for children classified as learning disabled. Although it is a risk, we hope at this stage in her life good subject area instruction with hand chosen teachers will be just as beneficial as will three hours a week of LD intervention.

These intimate experiences with my daughter's education, my years as a reading specialist and, of course, my classroom teaching experiences have led me to a kind of a resistance to the "grand narrative" (Lyotard, 1992; 1993) of learning disability. It is not that I want to turn the clock back to an idealized time when the term "learning disability" did not exist. Rather, it is a desire to critically revisit and reinterpret the master narrative of learning disability. Because the classroom is the place where the theory of learning disability meets the practice of teaching, I decided to invite a number of teachers to explore the "meaning of learning disability" with me. From the perspective of these teachers' classroom experiences I could begin to interrogate the reduction of the differences we find among children, and the way that they deal with school tasks, to discrete and identifiable disabilities in learning.

The Public Site

Although we acknowledge a research study has a strong personal orientation, there is a public sphere that informs us also. A question "comes" to us, inasmuch as it arises or "presents itself" rather than our merely formulating or raising such a question (Gadamer, 1984, p. 328).

WHALES TO SEE THE (Swarthout, 1975) is a book written for learning disabled children, their parents and their teachers. It features two LD children named John and Dee-Dee.

John

> John could feel [his teacher] peeking over his shoulder. He didn't mind because he considered his picture terrific, or at least great. He had the sea just right, dark blue and smooth, and the sky, light blue and bright. And he had everything in its proper place. . . . Painted in the sky was the picture's title: "WHALES TO SEE THE." He waited for her praise. "John, dear, " she said finally, "that's very good. The colors are true and the boat looks very real. There's just one small thing, though. Your title. You have the word 'WHALES' at the beginning. Don't you mean to call it 'TO SEE THE WHALES'?" John scowled at his title. As soon as she said it, he knew she was right. . . . [He] put down his brush, folded his hands on the desk, and stared straight ahead. He could sit that way all day. (pp. 17-18)

Dee-Dee

> The doctors didn't know exactly what the cause was, but in Dee-Dee's case she was a victim of "apraxia". . . [and] hyperkinesia." She was subject to "minimal brain dysfunction." This meant . . . she was like an automobile in motion, sometimes, without a driver. And when would their little girl recover from this handicap? her parents asked the doctor. Probably never, was the answer [but] certain drugs might help . . . The best thing for Dee-Dee would be to place her in a special school, where special teachers could help her personally to learn and grow and one day return to regular school and one day, still later, to live a happy, useful life. . . . When [her mother and father] left the doctors' offices . . . [they] couldn't even see [Dee-Dee trip over a bump in the sidewalk] through their tears. (pp. 28-29)

I found this book in the curriculum library while doing research on learning disability. Most of my research, previous to this, had been conducted in the History and Social Sciences Library or in the journals upstairs in the Education Library. But a careful look through the on-line catalogue revealed another source of information of which I had not been aware: stories about children with learning disabilities.

When the research upstairs addressed learning disability it spoke of subjects, treatments, and delivery systems while the books downstairs talked of children, their families, their friends and their teachers. John and Dee-Dee had histories, personalities, and relationships with others. In other words, there was more to John and Dee-Dee than their diagnosed learning disabilities. They had

their ups and their downs, their likes and their dislikes, their joys and their sorrows. In these stories the children were portrayed as complete people rather than uni-dimensional disabled learners.

Although I was struck by the difference between the holistic story child and the fragmented research child I noted also that both sets of texts shared the same basic belief, that is, the existence of a discrete, verifiable category called learning disability. This is hardly surprising. Most discourse on learning disability is situated firmly within an empirical-analytic epistemology that gives credence and support to such a belief (see pages 15 to 28). According to this discourse, the existence of an entity known as a learning disability is not in question. It exists, and it can be identified. The disability is located within the psychological make-up of the individual. Frequently the disability is treatable, but seldom is it cured.

Learning disability as a concept has been with us a relatively short time. Beginning in the mid 1960s, it gained popularity as a classification in North American schools to explain the discrepancy between a child's level of achievement and the level that an educational psychologist might expect. By the end of the decade, "an array of tests and remedial materials were devised, parents' groups were organized, LD graduate-school programs were opened, . . . journal articles and books on the subject multiplied [and] a profusion of LD research projects commenced" (Coles, 1987, p. 23). There was a belief that the discovery of learning disability, accompanied by the growing identification of such children, was a scientific breakthrough. Within this biological reductionist model learning disability was viewed as an educational abnormality, a pathological condition existing within a child's brain.

In many ways, this technological focus on the "disabled child" had humanitarian roots. Concern for the non-achieving child was growing in the

latter half of the twentieth century. Educators, parents and psychologists were no longer willing to let nature take its course as their pre-modern ancestors may have been. Parents did not want their non-achieving child labelled as "stupid", "lazy" or "rebellious." And who can blame them? No concerned parent would want to let a child sink or swim in the educational system and turn out "as God or nature intended."

Albert Borgmann, in *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, indicates that the "classic modernist reply to . . . pain and adversity has been the technological fix" (1992, p. 124). In a similar fashion, it was believed that science held the key to overcoming the adversity of the puzzling failure of a child to learn in school. Parents and professionals wanted to help the unfortunate child succeed in school but even more they wanted a theory to explain children's failure. Science had led to the identification of other afflictions such as hemophilia and cerebral palsy. Why not a scientific explanation for school failure too?

Because learning disability is a "residual" category (low performance which cannot be explained by other classifications such as mental retardation, hearing impairment and environmental deprivation) a biological model borrowed from science and neurology looked very attractive to some researchers and certain special educators. A neurological focus was ideal, because it had to do with the brain rather than the mind. Yet it was also mysteriously seductive because the source, or the cause of the affliction, was invisible. The notion of learning disability was a scientific puzzle to be solved. It was a noble enterprise to carry out the modernist project, saving children while advancing the frontiers in science.

In this way, certain children's difficulties in school became reduced to a single group of conditions called learning disabilities. Although not always explicitly stated, learning disability was believed to be a neurological affliction,

and as such, it was an objective entity existing outside the social and historical situation in which it made its presence known.

But the scientific search for the cause and cure of learning disability is not a neutral endeavor. It cannot be disconnected from human values and social concerns. James Carrier, a critical theorist who writes from a structural Marxist perspective, tells us that theories of learning disability have been "developed by human beings to describe [other] human beings" (1986, p. 17). According to Carrier, learning disability did not just spring forth objectively from disinterested, unbiased scientific research. It is profoundly social in its origins.

Granted, little is known about the neurological and mental processes involved in learning. Therefore, the possibility exists that properly conducted scientific inquiry could conceivably provide causal explanation for some types of student failure. But isolating mental functioning from the social context seems wrong-headed. There is more to learning difficulties than just biology. This is why research in the empirical-analytic tradition has been so disappointing over the last 30 years. Dominant LD theory argues its empirical methodology can ascertain what the learning disabled child lacks. As well as determining "this lack," so too do theorists believe that a correct procedure can be devised to overcome and/or remediate the disability. However, in actual fact, the LD field has been plagued by shortcomings, contradictory findings and failures since its inception (Coles,1978, 1987; Carrier, 1986, 1987; Sigmon, 1987). In short, according to Coles, Carrier and Sigmon, learning disability appears to be more conjecture than fact.

When questioned about the viability of the field, LD theorists have responded with comments such as, "At some future time . . . the propitious moment of precision will be present [and] then the path to clarity and precision [of learning disability] will be uncluttered and accessible" (Barsch, 1968, p. 20)

or "although a framework . . . for differentiating LD from other learning problems [has not yet been developed] properly defined and applied, the concept of learning disability still has scientific and practical promise" (Adelman, 1992, pp. 17 & 21). This fixation on discovering the "real" cause of learning disability sometime in the indeterminate future is what Borgmann calls "the modernist alibi" (1992, p. 26). Confident about science's capabilities, LD experts still dream of steady progress toward solving the mystery of learning disability. As Jencks points out in *The Post-Modern Reader*, each new movement in science's grandiose metaphysical claim always promises to be fresh, like an unknown future (1992b, p. 216).

Certainly, no one would question that learning disability has changed over the years. But its shifting orientations and new movements, still firmly entrenched within a technical paradigm, beg the question. Has progress, indeed, been made? Have those children classified as learning disabled reached some measure of success in their schooling? And if so, at what cost? By what means do we determine the measure of success? What about the non-achieving children who have not been classified as learning disabled? Who is allowed to decide the success of the learning disability project?

Within the dominant discourse of learning disability there is little, if any, acknowledgement of culture, ideology and history as being formative factors in its conception or in its evolution. Its totalizing world view offers little room for doubt or dissent. As odd as it may seem, although no apparent advancement in the theoretical field is evident, LD ideology is so powerful and seductive that it has effectively silenced most skeptical or dissenting voices.

Purpose of the Study

This study is an attempt to provide a dissenting voice; it is an effort "to break through the customary frames . . . to come in closer touch" (Greene, 1985, p. 79) with those most affected by learning disability discourse -- the teachers and their students.

The study questions modernist assumptions which reduce the difficulty certain children experience in school to a pathological condition called learning disability. Rather than merely accepting learning disability as an empirical reality, free of history and human interest, I am interested in investigating the relationship between learning disability as a discourse regime of science and as school practice.

The purpose is to challenge the totalizing learning disability narrative that has developed over the last 30 years. Although I acknowledge that the neurological and metacognitive orientations in learning disability do have relevance, this study is an attempt to shift the present dominant discourse away from its central position so different voices may be allowed to add their contributions to the discourse.

An understanding of the history of learning disability and that time which immediately preceded is essential if we are to truly understand the modernist agenda and consequently, learning disability's predominant place in modern culture. Therefore, in addition to providing a local and particular site -- the conversations with teachers of the learning disabled -- from which to launch a critique, a significant part of this study will be devoted to a critical, reflective revisitation of the history of learning disability and its contemporary discourse.

Research Questions

This thesis is an inquiry into the meaning of learning disability -- how it came into being, why it exists, the ways it has evolved and how it affects our (teachers, parents, students, educational policy) daily lives.

More specifically, my research question is this: what is it that has allowed us to construct the phenomenon called learning disability, and how does this phenomenon influence teaching practice?

In order to consider this larger question, the following questions will be explored in conversation with teachers of the learning disabled:

- What kinds of meanings do teachers give to the term learning disabled?
- How have teachers come to their understandings?
- What are the questions that teachers have about learning disability?
- What does it mean to teach students who are classified as learning disabled?

Chapter Two

A History of Learning Disabilities

Opening Remarks

The first reference to the phenomenon that has become known as learning disability came from the American psychologist and educator, Samuel Kirk. Kirk coined the term "learning disabled" in an address at a parent meeting of the Fund for Perceptually Handicapped in Chicago in 1963. He was referring to those children who exhibit a learning disorder which cannot be attributed to handicaps in hearing, sight, or any discernible mental retardation or emotional disturbance. Within five years the National Committee on Handicapped Children in the U.S.A. had developed an agreed upon definition which led to the formal acceptance of learning disability as a social reality in North America. This 1968 definition, with some minor changes, is still used today in the United States and Canada (see page one of this thesis for the Canadian definition) to delineate the field of learning disability. It reads as follows:

> Children with special learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written languages. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling or arithmetic. They include conditions which have been referred to as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, etc. They do not include learning problems which are due primarily to visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or to environmental disadvantages. (U.S. National Advisory Committee, 1968, p. 14)

Although we are looking at a field that has only a thirty year history in North American education, there has grown the general assumption that there are two groups of learners, those who are learning disabled and those who are not. The reality of the actual existence of learning disability as a discrete

phenomenon is seldom seriously questioned. The majority of LD research proceeds as if the existence were unproblematic, neither acknowledging the origins or the short history of the field. It is as if the idea of a learning disability is so natural that it requires no interrogation.

In the brief history of learning disability it has built up a sizeable body of knowledge legitimizing its presence as a field. It is important to determine the nature of this literature in order to understand the assumptions that underlie learning disability theory. The first part of this historical review will, therefore, describe four major orientations which have been influential in the development of dominant learning disability theory in North American education. The pedagogical implications of these dominant views of learning disability will also be discussed. The second part of the historical review will examine learning disability in its political and social contexts. The third major part will focus on a discussion of the dissenting voices in the field. The failure by both the education community and the general public to understand how learning disability has been shaped by social and political forces has resulted in a reified explanation of learning disability. This tendency to give material form to learning disability will be discussed in a fourth section of the chapter which will focus on word realism.

Dominant Theories of Learning Disability

Today's learning disabled child is a far cry from Morgan's "backward child" (cited by Mann, 1979; Franklin, 1987) and the "feeble-minded" student, cited in the 1939 edition of the Alberta Department of Education Program of Studies. There is not universal agreement, however, within the field of what constitutes learning disability. Torgesen, an associate editor of the *Journal of*

Learning Disabilities and Professor of Psychology at Florida State University, (1986) holds that there are two major orientations (in North American-based research) which have guided the theory, development and research of learning disability: the neurological model and the psychological processing model. Poplin, professor of education and director of teacher education at Claremont Graduate School, (1988) agrees with Torgesen, but adds two additional orientations, the behavioural model and the cognitive/learning strategies model.

Neurological orientation

The neurological perspective states that learning disability is caused by variation or damage to the neurological substrata (Torgesen, 1986, p. 399). James Carrier (1986) traces the neurological beginnings of learning theory to the late 1930s when two German physicians, Strauss and Werner, emigrated to the United States and began working at the Wayne County Training School in Detroit, Michigan, a state institution for the care and teaching of retarded children. Strauss, who was later credited with the creation of learning disability theory (Carrier, 1987; Franklin,1987; Kavale & Forness,1985; Mann,1979; Sigmon,1987; Sleeter, 1987) had been trained by Kurt Goldstein (1878-1956) at the Neurological Institute of the University of Frankfurt.

Goldstein had been working with First World War veterans who had suffered brain injuries during combat. As a result, he developed theories dealing with brain localization and cognition. He found that certain types of brain injury produced a loss of abstract reasoning leaving only a concrete attitude present in the patient (Carrier, 1986; Mann, 1979).

Once Strauss was in the United States working with Werner he applied Goldstein's research to retarded children. Strauss drew a distinction between what he believed to be two types of retardates: (a) endogenous, having familial

or genetic causes, and (b) exogenous, caused by brain injuries. He noted similarities between Goldstein's patients and the behaviour of children he classified as exogenous retardates. Although Strauss used Goldstein's research, he worked from quite a different premise. He moved from the soft signs of abnormal behaviour, assessed either through observation or cognitive and sensory-motor tests, to a diagnosis of localized brain injury (Carrier, 1986).

What begins with Strauss, then, is a pathological model of neurological functioning that states or implies that certain types of abnormal behaviour, one of which later came to be known as learning disability, are the result of neurological disorders. It is important to note that Goldstein acknowledged that much of this research which matched abnormal behaviour to brain injuries was speculative in nature. This was so because it was difficult to obtain direct proof that a brain injury actually caused abnormal behaviour (Franklin, 1987, p. 16). Goldstein also believed, as did the Canadian neurologist Wilder Penfield (1975), that ultimately it is the entire organism that responds, learns, and behaves, not just the (damaged) localized part of the brain.

Despite the fact that Strauss' research is built upon speculative empirical grounds it is, nevertheless, responsible for providing "a theoretical basis for the emergence of the learning disability field" in later years (Franklin, 1987, p. 33).

Psychological processes orientation

Kavale and Forness (1985) outline how other prominent special educators have moved in a separate direction toward a psychological processing view of learning disability. These educators include Frostig and Myklebust, as well as Kephart, Cruickshank and Kirk who worked with Strauss at the Wayne County Training School during the 1940s.

The psychological processing view assumes that learning disability is caused by "limitations or deficiencies in basic psychological processes . . . that are required to successfully perform academic tasks" (Torgesen, 1986, p. 399). Followers of this orientation claim that students are learning disabled because they have inadequate processing abilities (coding, storing, sorting, and so forth) and have generally weak perceptual pathways.

Kephart extended the biological theories of Strauss, stating that "correct mentality and thought content are based on accurate perceptions of the external world" (Carrier, 1986, p. 40). According to Kephart, a child who suffers from a learning disability does so because of perceptual failure. Working with Strauss in the 1950s, Kephart "noted the need to expand the study of brain injury to include children with normal intelligence" (Franklin, 1987, p. 41). Part of his theory is also credited to Cruickshank who, a few years earlier, had worked with cerebral-palsied children. These children, who were by definition brain damaged, were shown to have IQs similar to average children (Sigmon, 1987, p. 41). In other words, Cruickshank argued, intelligent people could be brain-damaged and learning disabled as well.

Samuel Kirk was probably the most famous of Strauss's three colleagues from the Wayne County Training School. He has been called "special education's most gifted scholar" (Mann, 1979). Kirk was committed to a belief that "specific processes or abilities rather than global ones are the basis on which to establish scientific instruction" (Mann, 1979, p. 523). Terms such as brain injury or cerebral dysfunction were being used to refer to children who were "unable to adjust in the home or to learn by ordinary methods in school" (Franklin, 1987, p. 29). Such terminology was not satisfactory to Kirk. This dissatisfaction led him to create the term learning disability, believing it to be the best behavioral characterization of these children and their problems.

The psychological processing orientation owes its development, in part, to the increasing sophistication of psychometrics in the late 1800s and the early 1900s. The "testing movement was closely related to mental hygiene and special education" (Tomkins, 1986, p. 180). Cognitive functioning, it is believed, can be broken down into smaller and smaller measurable constituents such as auditory perception, visual discrimination, spatial relations, and so forth. Low scores are treated as deficits; and students, if they have sufficiently high IQs, are considered as potential disabled learners.

Behavioural orientation

Learning disability underwent further change in the 1970s. The neurological and psychological processes models, although still prominent in the research, diagnosis and treatment of the LD condition, were beginning to be questioned by a behavioural model which focussed on perceived deficits in adequate learning behaviours. Unlike these previous models, behaviourism refused to speculate on the unobservable mechanisms of neurological and psychological processing. Instead it concentrated on behaviour, diagnosis and remediation.

Behaviourism expresses the belief that all students can reach mastery levels of achievement provided certain conditions are met: (a) students are correctly placed on the skills-based learning continuum, (b) their performance is managed by short term objectives, and (c) appropriate principles of reinforcement are used (Poplin, 1988; Torgesen, 1986). The theory of behavioural learning was extended to learning disability, implying that a child is learning disabled because of the lack of learned behaviours.

In one sense the behavioural view, which in the name of objectivity refuses to infer what goes on in the "black box," returns the learning disabled

learner to the fold of "the abled." Behavioural science places the LD child on a similar footing as other learners, whose behaviours, it is believed, can be influenced in measurable and observable ways. The main difference being, of course, that the LD child is falling off the edge of the lower end of the skills-based continuum. Efforts that go in behavioural science to break down learning for the so-called achieving child have to be increased even more for the learning disabled child. Instructional skills are inevitably reduced to smaller and smaller fragments as the behaviourists try to change learning disabled children into achieving students.

Metacognitive/learning strategies orientation

The 1980s has seen the focus in learning disability theory shift more towards a metacognitive model. Metacognition borrows the notion of sensory-based learning from psychological processes, combining it with an adaptation of self-reinforcement techniques from behavioural theory, and adding newer research on cognition and metacognition. Poplin (1988) holds that this orientation is more eclectic than the other three. Reacting to the behaviourist view which repudiates introspective action and seeks to control learning from the outside, metacognition places greater emphasis on interior learning.

Because metacognitive theory hypothesizes that learning disability is primarily a result of poor cognitive learning strategies, metacognition focusses on improving strategy behaviours which are thought to be common to all areas of school development (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1980). Determining how individual LD students learn and, in turn, having students think about their own thinking is the primary focus. An example of this is the work of Bernice Wong (quoted in Poplin, 1988 and Reynolds & Wade, 1986) who argues that deficits in ability and skills do not adequately explain the school failure of LD students.

Instead, she argues, what is more promising are intervention techniques which train students to become aware of skills, strategies and resources needed to effectively perform tasks. A second component of the cognitive/learning strategies approach is cognitive monitoring. This monitoring consists of "self-regulatory mechanisms in reading, studying, and problem solving" (Reynolds & Wade, 1986, p. 309) in which learners are asked to become engaged.

There is an assumption in the metacognitive approach that LD students will enjoy a greater measure of success in school related tasks by becoming involved in metacognitive activities such as verbalizing particular learning strategies. Since it is believed that improved learning occurs as a result of the acquisition of metacognitive strategies there is a further assumption that metacognition can be successfully taught to non-achieving LD students.

Pedagogical Implications of Dominant Views of Learning Disability

Theories of learning do not, of course, stay only within the community of research scholars where they were created. They also inform practice and eventually make their way into the classroom. Each of the views of learning disability that I have discussed carries with it different ideas about learning and teaching. Determining the pedagogical implications of these LD theories is a necessary part of any exploration into the meaning of learning disability.

Once a problem learner has been classified "learning disabled" by clinical experts who have been authorized to provide such diagnoses, the child returns to the classroom a different person. Regardless of where the initial concern for this "difficult" child originated, the responsibility for teaching the child, for helping him or her learn, is relegated to the school, and to the individual teacher. But what will the learning be like now that the child is no longer considered normal? How will the teaching be different for the LD child?

Whether or not it is stated explicitly each of the four dominant LD orientations implies particular pedagogies.

Neurological orientation

The neurological orientation is basically a medical model. As such, it focusses on pathology. The LD child is diagnosed as having an injury to, or disease of, the brain. Helping the child means treating the injury or disease, prescribing a remedy and trying to bring about recovery. Treatment is an often used expression; frequently it is recommended in the form of medication such as *Ritalin* for hyperactive or attention deficit disorder (ADD) children. Another favoured form of treatment is neurological retraining. For example, the disabled child is required to follow a regimen of gross motor development exercises such as crawling, balancing and correct walking (Kirby & Williams, 1991, p. 22, referring to Doman and Delcato). Such exercises are said to cure or improve the ailing part of the brain that is preventing the child from learning. A "cure" that enjoyed a brief flurry of attention a few years ago was a device that could be inserted in one of the child's ears to block hearing, the hypothesis being that LD children were receiving sound at different times from each ear. It was believed that this was the source of a dysfunction preventing LD children from learning.

Since pathological distractibility is also believed to be a cause of learning disability, other treatments have included students being placed in settings where all extraneous stimuli are removed, students' desks facing the wall, students working in isolation, distracting pictures being removed from books, and so forth.

Examples of such remediation techniques seen to be endless. Most of the treatments enjoy only a brief period of popularity since they meet with little

success. Many go underground for a time, only to resurface later with superficial changes. While the public schools have tended to reject the neurological model in the last few years, the prestige and mystique surrounding the medical profession make many people, both inside and outside educational circles, reluctant to give up these neurological techniques altogether (Coles, 1987; Poplin, 1988).

The student and teacher appear to be almost incidental in the neurological model. The expert is the medical specialist, who seldom if ever sets foot in a classroom but, nevertheless, is granted the authority to diagnose the learning, define it, and prescribe treatment "to cure" or alleviate the condition.

Psychological processes orientation

Pedagogical considerations in the psychological processes orientation are not unlike those of the neurological orientation. The child is still assumed to be a passive recipient of whatever treatment, training or instruction that is prescribed. The teacher is portrayed as one of the components of the "delivery system" for educational intervention (Alberta Education LD Manual, 1986). The teacher acts as an intermediary between the remediation devised by experts and the LD child, "delivering the messages that someone else writes."

As with the neurological orientation, remediation strategies in the psychological processes orientation are still somewhat removed from most traditional classroom activities. For example, while a neurological diagnosis might prescribe treatment in the form of medication such as Ritalin or a device such as an ear plug, methods in the psychological process model would deal almost exclusively with the sensory modalities. Training is the key phrase in the psychological processes orientation. Skills such as auditory perception, figure-

ground discrimination and visual memory are believed to be prerequisite to success in reading and related academic areas. The materials and methods of this orientation tend to have a very strong resemblance to the actual tests which are employed to conduct LD diagnoses. Failure to do well on a psychometric test of one description or another means that the child is trained to perform similar, if not identical, tasks to those on the test. In other words, the results are not interpreted. If a child does not do well on test items (which have only a hypothetical relationship to LD, but nevertheless are used to diagnose it) he or she is trained until the performance improves.

Experts within this conceptual framework pin their hopes on three propositions: (a) that there are weaknesses in psychological processes that cause failures in academic achievement, (b) that these weaknesses can be overcome by training, and most importantly, (c) that strengthened process skills will make a positive transfer into academic performance. As with the neurological orientation, it is not altogether clear that these remediation techniques demonstrate significant improvement in terms of educational achievement. Yet, such corrective process training continues to be recommended today by many clinical experts and is still practised in classrooms throughout North America.

Behavioural orientation

Unlike the previous two models, the behavioural orientation focusses more directly on the skills and behaviours that are believed to be foundational for academic success. While the neurological and the psychological processes approaches are concerned with diagnosis and analysis, the behavioural orientation is most concerned with remediation strategies. There is less talk that is oriented towards labelling conditions such as aphasia, attentional deficit

disorder and visual discrimination, and more emphasis on strategies such as task analysis, reinforcement techniques and management.

Superficially, the behavioural orientation appears to bear a close relationship to the kind of classroom discourse that teachers and students understand. But, upon closer examination we find that it shares basically the same outlook on the construction of learning disability as do neurological and psychological processing. Behaviourism implies that instruction is most effective when (a) it is approached in a piecemeal fashion, (b) it is highly controlled and tightly sequenced, (c) the student takes on a passive role and (d) the teacher's role is reduced to that of technical manager.

Again, as in the neurological and psychological models, the student makes no decisions about what is to be learned or how it is to be learned. The so-called individualized instruction is really no more than a skills-based learning continuum. The student's instruction is individualized to the extent that the child is placed at a different place than his or her peers on the same continuum. The teacher's role is limited to determining where to place students on this highly structured skills continuum, and deciding how to go about rewarding students for demonstrating correct responses.

One of the primary tenets of behavourism is that desirable learning behaviours be observable. If a long-range goal cannot be broken down into component parts or if a goal is not easily observable then such a goal will most likely be ignored and considered unimportant. As a result, a shrinkage of the curriculum to fit measurable objectives is inevitable.

Metacognitive/learning strategies orientation

In certain respects, the metacognitive orientation is somewhat of a departure from the other three orientations. Children are assumed to play more

of an active role in their learning in that they are taught to monitor and manage their own learning behaviours. They are also helped to recognize their preferred learning styles and to articulate how they learn. The teacher's role in relation to metacognitive strategies is to (a) determine, with the help of clinical specialists, the child's successful and unsuccessful learning strategies, (b) help students become more personally aware of their learning strategies, and (c) involve the child in learning strategies used by successful school learners.

The metacognitive approach is similar to behaviourism in the sense that it deals more directly with educational demands than do either the neurological or psychological processes orientations. It differs from the behaviourist view because it recommends that students take a more active role in their learning by being taught the metacognitive strategies necessary to succeed in academic tasks, rather than having them simply learn the required skill behaviours.

Like each of the other three models, the metacognitive approach locates the problem within the child. Learning disabled children are still considered to be aberrant learners; they are the ones who must be "fixed" so they can be like other people. Although a metacognitive orientation grants them an active role in the process, their action is directed towards what an authority on learning disability considers normal. In other words, the learner now has the responsibility of curing his or her own learning disability, a "disability" which he or she may not either be aware of, or desire to change.

Reviewing the Four Orientations

The preceding discussion has shown that pedagogical considerations in the dominant LD orientations do indeed differ somewhat from one to the other.

However, these four theories are more similar than they are unique. I think it could be safely said that, at base, each shares the following interests:

- accepting there is a discrete phenomenon called learning disability
- believing learning disability resides within the individual learner
- considering that discrepant performance in neurological, psychological and/or educational tasks is synonymous with learning disability
- reducing the whole child into a set of functional and dysfunctional parts in order to better explain his or her difficulties
- thinking that the learning disabled individual can be partly, if not totally, "cured" if provided with the proper treatment or training regimen
- assuming learning will take place if the learning act is broken into smaller and smaller pieces
- tacitly assuming learning disability exists as a concrete individualized psychological reality apart from the society in which it has come into being

These commonalities indicate that learning disability lies within a framework of empirical-analytic research which seeks to objectify phenomena for the purposes of investigation and prescription. The interest is in achieving technical control over the phenomenon in question. Thus the debate that goes on within the learning disability community about the correctness of various orientations is still preoccupied with rearrangements and realignments within the technical paradigm. The paradigm itself is not in question.

Learning theorists express a concern for the welfare of children, but this concern seems secondary to the effort invested in the construction of theories seeking to explain the perceived . The "learning different" child is seen primarily as a puzzle to be solved. But perhaps this undue focus on a child's hypothetical learning disability may not be in his or her best interests. It is still a thesis based on pathologizing different individuals, while (unconsciously)

remaking them to fit existing societal needs. As debate rages, as new theories are first devised and then abandoned, there is little, if any acknowledgement that learning disability is both historically and culturally determined.

Dissenting Views of Learning Disability

Not all literature about learning disability within the special education community is supportive of an empirical analytical orientation. There are some dissenting voices. Probably the first to attack the empirical foundations in any substantive manner was Gerald Coles, a professor of clinical psychiatry at Rutgers Medical School. In 1978 Coles made an extensive review of the ten most popular tests used to diagnose learning disability. Among the ten were Kirk's ITPA (Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities), the Frostig Developmental Test of Visual Perception and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children.

Upon completion of his review, Coles concluded that the test battery does not measure neurological dysfunctions in students who have been classified as learning disabled. This undermined the defining characteristic of learning disability, which, according to the 1968 definition authorized by the U.S. National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children, indicates that a learning disability is determined by the presence of a minimal brain dysfunction. In other words, it is Coles' contention that the ten major diagnostic tests can not differentiate between learning disabled and non-learning disabled children.

In later research, Coles (1987) supported his earlier thesis by conducting a more in-depth study of LD literature and neurological research. Comparing the differences in brain activity between normal and LD learners, he found that the differences not to be abnormalities. They "are simply biological distinctions that might be found between any group of people with different abilities" (1987,

p. xvii). Coles finds fault with the explanations of learning disability as a pathology which, he argues, (a) use illogical reasoning to discuss the relationship between the brain and behaviour to misinterpret symptoms, (b) too readily apply a medical label to superficially diagnosed and insufficiently understood academic problems. Learning disability, Coles contends, has been overwhelmingly concerned with the mental and behavioural activity of the child while disregarding the social context.

Coles concludes that the "entire field of learning disabilities has an empirical foundation too frail for the ponderous structure that has been erected upon it" (1978, p. 330). Algozzine and Ysseldyke, American professors of special education and educational psychology, respectively, (1987, 1983) concur, showing that the ability-achievement discrepancies, which is one of the essential criteria for determining a learning disability, exist in normal as well as in learning disabled populations. By finding out that scientific testing measures cannot currently determine the presence of learning disability Coles, Algozzine and Ysseldyke urge educators to look for answers in the political and social realm rather than in the biological and psychological domains.

The invitation to investigate the political and social realm of learning differences has been taken up by a group of dissenters who may be broadly classified as critical-social theorists. Educators such as Carrier (1986, 1987); Franklin (1987); Sleeter (1986, 1987); and Sigmon (1987) examine the sociopolitical forces at work in terms of who defines learning disability, through which processes is it defined, and whose interests are served by the definition. Sigmon, an American school psychologist, concludes that "the LD question is a societal problem, not an intrapsychic individual student problem" (1987, p. 93).

The paradigm shift that Kavale and Forness (1985) and others are anticipating from an empirical-analytic perspective is, to some extent, already

occurring from within the social-critical perspective. Critical-social theory tempers the quest for objective scientific certainty with the need to socially interpret and historically analyze the creation of the label learning disability. The orientation is different from Kavale and Forness's expectation, whose primary interest remains in advancing LD towards a more mature scientific status, one that has an improved understanding of the causes of learning disability, as well as an improved methodology for treatment.

Another dissenting view on learning disability is put forward by researchers who focus on an institutional critique of schooling and pedagogy. These include Mary Poplin (1984, 1985, 1987, 1988a,1988b), Lous Heshusius (1982, 1984, 1986, 1989a, 1989b, 1991), and Richard Iano (1986, 1990) who take issue with many of the field's traditional views, suggesting that inappropriate curriculum and inadequate instruction are largely responsible for the school failure of the so-called learning disabled child. In short, Iano, Heshusius and Poplin are saying that the child's difficulties in school are not necessarily attributable to an intrinsic disability within the child. Instead of "blaming the child," as Coles and Sleeter suggest empirical-analytic LD theory does, these researchers "blame the schooling" and "the teaching." Poplin argues that the field of learning disability is "firmly grounded in the paradigmatic values of reductionism and reductionistic learning theory" (Poplin, 1988a, p. 389). It is an unfortunate fact, Poplin states, that learning disability has changed little over the years:

> We continue to demonstrate in model after model . . . that we still believe (a) that learning disability can be reduced so as to allow definition of a single verifiable entity (or set of entities), (b) that the teaching/learning process is most effective when most reduced (e.g., controlled, focused, and segmented), and (c) that the reduction of educational services is beneficial. (Poplin, 1988a, p. 398)

Poplin urges special educators to shed reductionistic theories and discard measurement and instructional methods that have their origins in dated medical models. What is needed from researchers in remedial education, she believes, is a willingness to spend more time in schools. Only then, Poplin says, will people in the field be able to go beyond their superficial understanding of learning disabled students and the people and institutions who serve them (Poplin, 1987).

Heshusius, a professor of education at York University, like Poplin, argues for holistic conceptions of the learning disabled child, teaching methods and the learning process. What Heshusius means by holistic thought is an interest in understanding complexity in its own right rather than trying to understand complexity by fragmenting it into small, often hypothetical units. She believes the deficit-driven models of learning disability which focus on causality in diagnosis reflect a reductionistic and mechanistic world view that dates back to Newtonian physics. It is her contention that such an outlook contributes to the reduction of difference to disability, learning to programmed sequential tasks, and teaching to controlled reinforcement techniques. Within the deficit-driven model the learning disabled student, she reiterates, is viewed as a "reactive/passive organism [who acts in observable and quantifiable ways], just as matter in Newtonian physics was seen as passive" (1982, p. 8).

Although Heshusius admits that the "mechanistic paradigm" is still held in high regard within special education circles she points to the emergence of holistic approaches as a hopeful sign. She recognizes, however, that the influence of holistic thinking grows slowly because holism acknowledges "understanding complexity," rather than "reduction to simplicity,"as its major task (1989a, p. 413).

Iano, a professor of special education at Temple University, Philadelphia, also sees the limitations of what he calls the "natural science-technical model" (1986, p. 50) where special educators are inclined to view "the remediation of learning disabilities as primarily a technical task" (p. 50). He believes that the expectation that teaching and learning can be brought under technical control is misguided and largely irrelevant for education. As well as seeing the failure of the learning disability field to develop a distinctive scientific theory, he views the "research topics and aims, studies, hypotheses and data collections . . . as entirely unrelated to what school teachers see as their central problems and concerns" (Iano, 1986, p. 51). Just as Poplin does, Iano implies that if researchers are to know what they are studying, they must turn to the school where learning disability takes on a practical meaning in the lives of students and teachers.

Learning Disability - A Social Historical Review

It is difficult to know precisely where to begin when talking about any historical and social artifact such as learning disability. While researchers such as Carrier (1986, 1987) and Franklin (1987) have traced the "science of learning disabilities" to Strauss and Werner, Lester Mann (1979) says learning disability has historical roots in brain localization and faculty theories which date back thousands of years.

My objective, however, is not to retrace the empirical evidence cited by Mann and others such as Wiederholt in his 1974 study when they fashion a history of learning disability. Their interests are immanent to the LD field, and seem more concerned with strengthening its empirical-analytic foundations. Rather, my interest is an inquiry into teachers' meanings and how the

construction of learning disability has influenced those meanings. Thus this social historical review will consider the social context of the origins of the learning disability field.

Certainly, an obvious beginning point for a social history of learning disability would be Samuel Kirk's 1963 landmark address when the term learning disability was first publicly used. Another possible starting point might also be 1968 when the definition became institutionalized as a conceptual category in American education. But neither of these historic events from within the chronology of the learning disability field indicates the wider social context of the 1960s.

Christine Sleeter (1986, 1987) links the origins of learning disability with the growing public criticism of progressivism in American schools in the post-Sputnik era. Such criticisms were also voiced in Canada by Hilda Neatby in her 1953 book *So Little for the Mind*. Neatby charged that "an overemphasis on ease, pleasantness, and egalitarianism . . . resulted in an anti-intellectual, anti-cultural and anti-moral climate in Canadian schools" (Neatby, quoted in Tomkins, 1986, p. 287). Other critiques of the alleged soft pedagogy also spoke of the scientific gap between the Soviet Union and North America. These national shortcomings were laid at the door of deficient school curricula (Tomkins, 1986).

In the post-war years there were major changes in the public's expectations of schools. Literacy, which had not originally been the paramount concern in education, had, in industrial and post-industrial North America, become the central focus. Faced with a growing societal demand for white collar workers -- ones who could read directions and perform clerical tasks -- curriculum became much more print-oriented. This demand for functional literates who could read simple instructions can also be traced to military needs

during the Second World War (Sleeter, 1987; Tomkins, 1986). As reading standards in schools increased to meet the requirements for a functional citizenry, more children than ever before were unable to keep up.

The origins of learning disability can also be traced, in part, to the rise of compulsory schooling itself in the late 1800s. Not long afterwards, crude classifications of children separated the "abnormals" from the "normals." Among the first to be classified abnormal were the deaf mutes and the blind. As early as 1906, such special needs students, in the newly formed province of Alberta, were sent to residential schools in Winnipeg, Manitoba or Brantford, Ontario. In 1918, a school in Edmonton was established for "mentally defective" students from across the province. From the 1920s onwards there was a gradual move towards the establishment of auxiliary classes in district schools "for children of sufficiently serious mental defect . . . to keep pace with their normal peers (Csapo & Goguen, 1980, p. 25). By 1950 there were 78 special education classes in Alberta. Such students were classified as either deaf, blind or subnormal. Later in the 1960s a newly created group called learning disabled students would join the ranks of these atypical learners.

As a result of growing public criticism of education in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a concerted effort to improve educational levels and literacy standards in schools. Ability grouping was a favourite strategy. With this method students could be divided into bright, average and slow learners. Each group could pursue educational goals commensurate with its ability and less capable students would no longer slow down the brighter ones. Schools came to see it as natural that some children would be unable to meet the demands of the regular curriculum. Canadian schools followed the American lead, and the first recorded class for children who were retarded in reading was formed in 1953 (Csapo & Goguen, 1980).

By the mid 1960s the bottom 20% of children unable to keep up were becoming more differentiated by being classified as either sensory impaired (hearing or vision), speech impaired, mentally retarded, culturally deprived, emotionally disturbed or slow learners. Along with these classifications went special class placement and additional funding. Before this time there was no distinct category called learning disability.

Sleeter (1987) argues that the new category of learning disabled, non-achieving students was developed as an acceptable explanation for the reading failure of North American white middle-class children. Parents were concerned that their supposedly normal children were failing at school tasks. They wanted explanations that would absolve them of any blame and would ensure their children of special educational considerations. Students so classified would be ensured of special funding and reduced class sizes available under the auspices of special education yet all the while remaining removed from the stigma of other atypical learners. As an aside, it is worth mentioning that Sleeter's analysis has met with resistance within the learning disability movement. Knonick (1990), for one, argues that before the term learning disability was coined, few services were available for this group of children who were "able yet learning little in school" (p. 5).

Samuel Kirk's introduction of the concept of learning disability at a parent meeting for the Perceptually Handicapped in 1963 was, to some extent, a response to parent pressure. In a sense, he was speaking for many special educators who were interested in moving special education towards scientific respectability. Such an organically based explanation which focussed on a neuropsychological causation model seemed to advance the field in the direction that parents and educational psychologists desired.

Special education classes for the learning disabled began to appear in some metropolitan centres in the United States and Canada in the mid sixties and early seventies. In 1972 in Alberta, two special assessment centres were established for the diagnosis and assessment of suspected LD children. Soon afterwards school boards, with the help of special provincial grants, began to set up special programs for the learning disabled (Csapo & Goguen, 1980).

Since learning disability was viewed as a biologically based disorder its creation posed no threat to the social order. The cause of the poor school achievement of this group of children was not interpreted to lie with the educational system. Instead, the problem was identified as being intrinsic to the individual. Because the cause of the disability was believed to be a neurological or psychological process dysfunction, the student was perceived to be the victim of a mysterious affliction.

Testing was seen as "a means of modifying the unrealistic expectations of children and their parents" (Tomkins, 1986, p. 84). It could be used to classify non-achieving children into categories such as culturally deprived or slow learner. If need be, as in the cases of parental involvement in the establishment of learning disability, testing could be mustered to rescue a special few from the other low achievers who were primarily low-income and minority children.

Although learning disability doctrine has changed since the 1960s, the notion of situating the disability within the child has not altered. However, what has changed, Sleeter would argue, is the composition of what she calls "the victimized group." She notes that "as a result [of minority groups exerting pressure], children of colour have recently been classified increasingly less as retarded, emotionally disturbed, or slow, and more as learning disabled" (1987, p. 231). Litigation suits on behalf of the rights of the handicapped and visible minorities for a free and appropriate education have aided this shift. One

precedent setting case was Larry P. versus Riles in San Francisco in 1971. It was filed on behalf of certain plaintiffs and all black children in California. The defendants were State Superintendent of Education Riles, the state board of education and the district school board. The plaintiffs alleged that they and the class they represented had been wrongly placed in classes for the mentally retarded. The court ruled that the board, among other things, must ensure that the number of black children in EMR classes must not exceed the percentage that blacks were of the total enrollment (Gearheart, 1980, pp. 19-21).

In 1978, 10.98% of the total school population in the United States were considered special education students; of this percentage, 1.89% were classified as learning disabled students. Nine years later in 1987, the learning disability population had risen to 4.8% (Learner, 1988, p. 18). By 1993, over one third of the students in special education were classified as learning disabled (Lyon, Gray, Kavanagh, & Krasnegor, 1993). Although it is difficult to provide a full interpretation of these statistics, it would appear that more children are moving out of categories such as slow learner and culturally deprived into the category of learning disabled. A further conjecture would be that more of these new students belong to the minority and low-income groups, as indicated by Sleeter (1987, p. 210). However, even with this more egalitarian process "it appears that LD classes [today] are still disproportionately middle and upper middle class" (Sleeter, 1987, p. 232).

Speaking from my own personal experience, Sleeter's explanation appears to ring true, at least here in Alberta. Although such information is not readily available in cumulative record cards or class lists, learning disabled classes seem, for the most part, to be composed of middle class children. Many people would agree, when pressed, that this is a strategy "middle class parents use to protect their children" (Sleeter, p. 232). However, I do not think they

would agree that minority children are discriminated against in terms of their entry into learning disability classes. Nor would they support the notion that low income students are an excluded group. They would point to the fact that LD funding is available to any child in the system. And to some extent, this is true. Any child is a potential candidate. But there is also an unspoken belief that other areas of special needs such as adaptation and emotionally disturbed would be more suitable for low income and minority group children. Since the main criterion for entry into an LD class is a high I.Q score on standardized intelligence tests, low income and minority children have less likelihood of meeting that requirement.

Sleeter's assertion that "learning disabilities, . . . rather than being a discovery of science and an instance of progress . . . , [is] an attempt to maintain race and class stratification" (p. 233) would, of course, have to be supported by investigations into race and social class composition of learning disability classrooms before Sleeter's contention could be proven to be the case here in Alberta. Although I know of no present study that is exploring this issue, such an undertaking could provide valuable information for special education in particular and schools in general.

Learning Disability as Word Realism

Although learning disability was introduced to the North American public just thirty years ago, most of the public today is acquainted with the term. The identification is commonly used in everyday conversation as well as in educational institutions. It is also not unusual to hear confessions of personal experiences, anecdotes and stories about learning disability in the popular media.

Dyslexia is probably the most familiar term in the lexicon of learning disability. In the February 8, 1990 issue of *Macleans,* the Canadian-born photographer, Douglas Kirkland explains how he failed to do well in school because he suffers from dyslexia. Dr. Paul Donohue's syndicated column in *The Edmonton Journal* of March 29, 1993, states uncategorically that dyslexia exists as "some miswiring of brain circuitry." An article in *The Edmonton Journal* on December 3, 1989 carries the headline "One in Ten Saddled with Invisible Disability," and it goes on to explain that at "least one in ten Canadians is learning disabled." A diverse list of high profile people such as Henry Winkler, Nelson Rochefeller, Michelangelo, Albert Einstein, Cher, Thomas Edison and Winston Churchill are among those identified as having been afflicted with a learning disability .

So common is the existence of learning disability that the affliction now appears in comedy routines. An American comedian begins his routine explaining how typical his life is: a nine to five job, a wife, a house with a mortgage, three kids, one with a learning disability . Everyone laughs, and is reassured how common learning disabilities are. The arresting fact is that this joke could not have been told in the United States before 1965 and it would probably be incomprehensible in many countries today. Learning disability has, in its short history, become part of North American culture. The "word" has become "the reality."

Our world is a world built upon words. Yet, we seldom inquire into the relationship between words and reality. We simply accept that words represent reality. Because a word has phonemic and graphemic substance, it is taken to be real. It is as if we believe reality is just lying out there, already ordered into meanings, waiting to be translated into words. So when a word takes up a place within our language, or in the case of learning disability, two known words

are combined to make a new meaning, the reality of the referent is taken for granted; it is assumed to be true. If the words learning disability exist, the pathological condition to which they refer must exist as well.

Contrary to the representational value of language, the encounter between humans and the environment is mediated by the word. The word, as symbol, refers to something larger than itself. This something greater cannot be contained in the word, but only pointed to by the word. The tendency to view the word as the thing itself rather than as pointing towards the thing means the word takes on a kind of reality uniquely its own. The word comes to refer only to itself, as if it somehow contains its own meaning. Words become transformed into something on the same level, and of the same nature, as that of concrete reality. A failure to see words as a way that humans codify "what is out there" is to move towards word realism -- to see reality mirrored in the word.

We can see word realism working in several ways in learning disability:

1. First, by giving a name to a notion, we find we have created an entity that now dwells in reality on the same footing as other objects (Bain, 1989). This can be seen in reification whereby we treat a hypothetical construct as a substantial thing.

According to Coles (1978, 1978) and Sleeter (1986, 1987), learning disability came about largely as a scientific explanation of the poor school achievement of North American middle class-children. The political and social reasons for its creation, which usually go unexamined within the dominant learning disability discourse, indicate how a conjectural idea can rapidly take hold within a particular historical era. A body of knowledge develops around the term, and the construction of the concept is quickly forgotten. Energies become diverted towards solving the puzzle of learning disability rather than focussing on the condition of the child who carries such a label. The lack of

empirical verification does not dissuade committed supporters from believing in the existence of learning disability as an identifiable condition.

2. Giving a name to an idea lends an illusion of power over that idea. Word realism's central manifestation is in the power that words have over us, and the sense of power over reality that words provide. Positing a notion, giving it grammatical and lexical substance in language, bestows meaning upon it and allows people to exert control over its further development and influence. Words like learning disability, which take on the appearance of reality, can also serve to divert attention from differences among people. Recognizing a difference in others, yet not being able to understand it, produces a fear of the unknown and unleashes a desire to control. The difference becomes labelled "learning disability " to subdue this fear. Once named, the inevitable difference one confronts in schools is believed contained by the word. In such a fashion difference is reduced to disability in the process of naming.

The power of naming increases with the development of a technical vocabulary. In the case of learning disability, specific disabilities such as "developmental aphasia," "minimal brain dysfunction," "childhood dysphasia," and "auditory perceptual disorder" lend legitimacy to the overall label. The lay public has little access to such vocabulary and disbelief tends to be suspended. The words become the property of neurologists, psychologists, and clinical specialists who author and authorize the new vocabulary. Being able to manipulate the words while simultaneously bowing to the authority of the new language provides learning disability experts with power over the lay public, and control over the ideas themselves.

3. Once a name is bestowed upon an idea we fix meaning in such a way that thinking otherwise is considerably curtailed. The many voices that either saw or sought different understandings of reality have been silenced by one

privileged voice of explanation. This fixing permits reality to emanate from the word itself rather than from the situation(s) that gave rise to the notion before it became inscribed in the word. "Through its authorization, learning theory became one element of what our society knows" (Carrier, 1986, p. 16). The words learning disability have altered perception, bringing into being children who are learning disabled. We did not know this before. Now that the words exist, and the concept is given substance in the language, it is not easy to dislodge. Learning disability becomes part of "the way things are."

The extra-ordinary use of language that surrounds and permeates the field of learning disability denies entry to those who do not have possession of the words, those who are not part of the LD establishment. The words, around which the phenomenon of learning disability revolves, project precision, objectivity and rationality. Such words resist critical evaluation. Those who have concerns about children's difficulties in school find their concerns reduced to the vocabulary of disability. Other possibilities of understanding are closed off.

4. The tendency to see reality reflected in the word apart from the human community in which it was defined leads us to believe that words have meanings independent of human action and intention. Believing that the word is substantial matter in itself conceals the fact that the word developed out of specific social and historical situations. Hence, questioning how the word itself came into being and upon which assumptions it rests is not raised as an important consideration. The empirical-analytical orientation of learning disability denies a social history. Instead, there is a belief that the discovery and identification of learning disabled children reflects the growing scientific sophistication of special education. In other words, learning disability has been

here all along awaiting the development of appropriate theories and testing technologies to detect its presence.

Reflections upon the Dominant Views and upon the History of Learning Disability

The discussion of word realism provides a critical perspective on the four dominant orientations within the learning disability field: neurological, psychological processes, behavioural, and metacognitive strategies. What these four orientations have in common is the assumption that empirical science can locate the causes and prescribe the treatments for specific learning disabilities. At base is the belief that learning disabled children actually exist as an identifiable category in the first place. The possibility of diagnosis and treatment of learning disability rests on this *a priori* belief as a corporeal entity.

Although the four dominant orientations differ in their explanations of student failure, they all basically believe there is an identifiable disability within the LD child that exists apart from the social conditions in which the disability is "discovered." Causes, diagnostic procedures and remediation change from model to model but the fundamental ideology remains the same: learning disability exists as a pathology and differences are assumed to be abnormalities that require treatment to move towards normalcy. None of these perspectives examine the social, historical and political realms in which the learning disability makes its presence known. Classification and definition "play their political role, moving the focus away from the need to rectify social conditions affecting the child" (Coles, 1978, p. 333).

As members of the special education community align themselves with one theory or another they fail to recognize the common myth that underlies all of the approaches, that is, the myth of objective scientific correctness. Kavale

and Forness speak of solving the scientific "puzzle of learning disability" (1985, p. 16). Wondering why learning disability has not experienced a paradigm shift because of its many anomalies, they conclude that learning disability is still in a preparadigmatic period (Kavale and Forness, 1985; 1987). Their concern is to "advance LD towards a mature scientific status" (Kavale and Forness, 1985, p. 7), believing that this maturity will come with a more "systematic study of the observed phenomena" (Kavale and Forness, 1985, p. 19). Although Kavale acknowledges the "almost perpetual state of chaos in learning disabilities" (1993a, p. 171) he argues that "learning disabilities will never appear to be a science until it . . . adopts scientific attitudes" (1993a, p. 183) which "should have little to do with sociopolitical views" (1993a, p. 186).

Like Kavale, Torgesen (1993) also believes that the significant answers lie in a more rigorous scientific approach. He, too, is confident in the belief that learning disability is emerging and maturing (1986). He blames the rapid growth of the field for existing weaknesses and contends it is "through bold overstatement and political pressure, [that the field of LD] has created laws and processes" (1993, p. 155) that cannot be supported by a coherent and comprehensive theory of learning disability. In fairness to Torgeson, he is willing to concede that the field of learning disability can benefit from "multiple theoretical approaches" (1993, p. 153). However, he believes that "the largest amount of effort [should go] to the development of causal theories of learning disabilities" (1993, p. 157). In effect, he is suggesting that the answers to this "disabling condition" lie waiting in the wings somewhere to be explicated by a more precise theoretical model, more accurate descriptions of LD children, better tests, and improved treatments.

As recently as 1993, a group of senior scholars of learning disability gathered together under the sponsorship of The United States Institute of Child

Health and Human Development, was willing to admit that "learning disability remains one of the least understood of the various disabling conditions that affect school-age children" (Lyon, 1993, p. xvii). Seemingly undeterred by the absence of "technically inadequate measurement instruments, fragmentary evidence" (Lyon, 1993, p. xvii), and a "logically consistent, easily operationalized, empirically valid definition and classification system", (Lyon & Moats, 1993, p. 9) the primary goals among learning disability scholars remain to develop a "powerful conceptual system of classification and [a] more precise operational definition" (Keogh, 1993, p. 312) that is open to empirical scrutiny.

Poplin, Iano and Heshusius, all dissenting voices in the LD debate, recognize the futility of the dominant empirical-analytic orientation in special education. They see the harm done to students by the fragmentation of learning and the reduction of difference to disability. The holism that Poplin and Heshusius speak of seems to be leading the way towards a more caring reflection upon what we see children and teachers doing in schools. However, we must be careful that we do not merely replace the abstracted notion of reductionism they so vehemently oppose with the equally abstracted notion of holism when considering learning disability. A switch from "blaming the child" to "blaming the teacher" or "blaming the curriculum," however well-intentioned, is still a totalizing discourse which will not lead to the kind of understanding of difference needed in schooling and curriculum.

The majority of LD research has been directed toward the construction of "a metatheory that can accommodate, explain, and predict the complex relationship that exists among cognitive abilities, the environment, schooling, genetics, cultural background, neurological functioning, and academic underachievement" (Lyon, Gray, Kavanagh & Krasnegor, 1993. p. 96 summarizing Kavale, 1993). This kind of reasoning is pinned upon what

Docherty (1993) in his book *Postmodernism: An Introduction* calls "the false hope that there is a great unifying chain in nature which links together . . . all the random and diverse elements of a seemingly heterogeneous and pluralistic world" (Docherty, 1993, p. 9). Here we see the child's learning, identified as disabled, being analyzed and reconstituted into the abstract categories of particular kinds of learning disability. The task of the empirical-analytic scientist is to offer a theory that will restore these hypothetical pieces in a fashion that will explain and identify the causes of learning disability. Knowledge of the learning disabled child is subsequently reduced to a kind of technology; it is "conceived as abstract and utilitarian, as a mastery over recalcitrant nature" (Docherty, 1993, p. 6). Many learning disability theorists know the meaning of learning disability only insofar as they can manipulate what they believe to be its essential components. This empirical-scientific knowledge is both limiting and distorting because that which is not amenable to categorization and rational thought escapes notice entirely. Ultimately the explanations of disability are usually unsatisfactory because the reality of the difficulty in the school context is much more complex than analytical frameworks available. This is why different theories and approaches rise and fall within the field of learning disability.

Nevertheless, within the learning disability community, such failures have not persuaded many to abandon the project of seeking a mature science of learning disability. Failures and frustrations are interpreted as a necessary consequence of any "emerging youthful scientific field." Every change is believed to be an advance on the march of progress. Because the promised land of secure explanatory causes and effective treatments is believed to exist sometime in the indeterminate future, the present is often sacrificed in service to the future. Consequently, there seems to be a lack of interest in the everyday experienced world of the child who is called learning disabled. In this study, I

hope to speak to this absence by attending directly to the local and specific meanings of learning disability in school settings.

Chapter Three

Inquiring into the Meaning of Learning Disability

Developing a Research Orientation

Learning disability was supposed to make a difference in the lives of students. Parents, teachers, and communities were led to believe that learning disability would explain and solve the difficulties that certain children experience in school. Yet research about whether this promise has been kept is, at best, inconclusive. We do not really know whether or not classifying apparently "intellectually normal" students as learning disabled has helped to explain their difficulties and/or improve their achievement in schools. Certainly, one of the reasons we know little about the effects of learning disability theory on long-term, classroom learning is because the majority of research occurs in experimental settings, far removed from the everyday lives of teachers and students. Controlled experimentation is thought, according to a technical rationality, to produce valid and objective findings. Teachers' and students' voices are seldom, if ever, heard in this kind of research which concerns itself with observing and explaining a narrow band of human behaviour.

Inquiring into learning disability as a form of word realism helps us understand how quickly a hypothetical construct such as LD can take hold in a society. We can also see how difficult it is to dislodge and/or re-conceptualize the present day notion of learning disability when people are inclined to believe the words *learning disability* are real in the sense that they describe a reality distinct from the human community in which they were developed.

By considering the critical-social thesis that the category of LD children was created primarily to explain the poor school performance of middle class children, we acknowledge that learning disability is a socially constructed artifact rather than a concrete reality. The dissenting voice of critical-social theory exposes the ideology lurking beneath learning disability in terms of LD being both a culture and class-based issue. It provides a social-political explanation for the creation of learning disability as well as revealing the injustices done to minority and working class children by the creation of the LD category. But it does not address pedagogical concerns nor does it seem to offer a way out of technical reason. Care must be taken that we do not merely content ourselves with social critique, correct though it may be, and forget about the child whose very real difficulties in school are still at the heart of the matter.

The question of the meaning of learning disability would not have been raised two or three decades ago because the dominant empirical-analytic orientation in educational research would not have permitted such an interpretive question. By researching the social-historical development of learning disability, we are able to explore the assumptions that underlie the existence of learning disability theory and to investigate its origins. Calling into question the reality of learning disability as a discrete, concrete phenomenon then opens the way for a deeper, more meaningful inquiry into the very real difficulties children face in schools.

Hermeneutics as a Research Approach

An interpretive turn in research is needed if we are to achieve a fuller understanding of the meaning of learning disability. Although producing many theories and experimental studies over the last two decades, empirical-analytic orientations to learning disability have not provided consistent or pedagogically

practical explanations of the phenomenon. Nor has the objectification of learning disability in the form of hypothetical pathological conditions and abstract technical language given us much direction for teaching.

The questions of what understandings teachers have of learning disability, how they have come to these understandings, and what it means to teach LD students have remained relatively unexplored. This study makes such an inquiry in the belief that the lives and experiences of teachers offer a legitimate source for illuminating the meaning of learning disability. Engaging individual teachers in conversation about the meaning of learning disability implies that living with difference and teaching amidst that difference is a problem of practice. Habermas indicates that discerning practice and practical reason is difficult in a culture saturated in technical science. According to Habermas,

> The real difficulty in the relation of theory and praxis does not arise from this new function of science as technological force, but rather from the fact that we are no longer able to distinguish between practical and technical power. Yet even a civilization that has been rendered scientific is not granted dispensation from practical questions; therefore a peculiar danger arises when the process of scientification transgresses the limit of technical questions, without, however, departing from the level of reflection of a rationality confined to the technological horizon. (Habermas, 1973, quoted in Bernstein,1983, p. 43)

Gadamer, too, warns of the tendency in modern society to confuse and deform questions of *praxis* with questions of *techne*.

> . . . the chief task of philosophy is to . . . defend practical and political reason against the domination of technology based on science . . . . In all the debates of the last century practice was understood as application of science to technical tasks . . . . It degrades practical reason to technical control. (Gadamer, 1975, quoted in Bernstein, 1983, pp. 39-40)

Habermas and Gadamer, with their insights into practical reason, help develop questions which allow understandings of practice to emerge during research. Using a hermeneutic approach to address the question of learning disability with teachers returns research to the ground of teaching practice. It lets teacher-participants speak of the meanings of teaching and being with LD children on a daily basis.

The Hermeneutic Tradition

The word hermeneutics is rooted in the ancient Greek word *hermeneuein* which meant to interpret or translate (Webster's Third New International Dictionary). The word hermeneuein owes its creation to Hermes, the messenger god. Hermes carried messages from the gods on Mount Olympus to the mortals on earth. Since the Greeks believed it was Hermes who invented language and speech he was simultaneously considered as interpreter and translator as well as trickster and contriver. "Words, Socrates says, have the power to reveal, but they also conceal; speech can signify all things, but it also turns things this way and that" (Hoy, 1982, p. 1).

More recently in the Christian tradition, hermeneutics had to do with the correct interpretation of Biblical scriptures. The hermeneut, as a skilled interpreter and church official, would interpret messages of the past to contemporary audiences. Although the Biblical message may have been considered ambiguous or even hidden to most readers, it was believed that a correct interpretation, guided by a strict set of rules, could be achieved (Hoy, 1982).

Schleiermacher

In the nineteenth century, Schleiermacher, who is regarded as a founder of modern hermeneutics, extended the hermeneutic study of Biblical and classical texts to general texts such as legal documents and works of literature. He believed one of the fundamental task of hermeneutics was to formulate a set of rules or principles to help resolve misunderstanding when interpreting texts. In order to ensure an objective understanding, Schleiermacher drew a distinction between what he saw to be two types of interpretation: the meaning embedded in the grammar of the language and the psychological meaning of the author. Grammatical interpretation dealt with objective features of language which were relatively independent of the writer while psychological interpretation focussed on the recovery of authorial meaning (Carson, 1984; Oh, 1986).

Dilthey

Wilhelm Dilthey took up Schleiermacher's project of a general hermeneutics and extended it into the wider context of historical and human affairs. Dilthey's hermeneutic project was the development of an epistemology of the human sciences which would take into consideration our connectedness to the human world rather than merely the natural world. His task was "to do for the human sciences what Kant presumably accomplished for the natural sciences" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 112). He was willing to accept Kant's conviction that there is a world that exists independently of us as "knowers" as foundational for the natural sciences. However, he saw its limitations in the human sphere. He viewed the task of human sciences as one of reconstructing the objectified and unchanging truths of life as expressed in "great texts" and "works of art" through an orderly and systematic project of hermeneutic

recovery. Dilthey viewed these great works as the tangible and objective expression of lived experience; a properly conducted interpretation of humanly produced texts would result in the recovery of these enduring, objective truths. Battling the powerful claims of an emerging positivistic philosophy, Dilthey saw the need to establish an equally strong, empirical grounding for the cultural-historical world (Crusius, 1991; Gallagher, 1992).

Heidegger

Heidegger's hermeneutics questioned the meaning of understanding and interpretation in Scheiermacher's and Dilthey's theories. His conception of hermeneutics was founded on an ontology of *Dasein* as existence. Thus, according to Heidegger, interpretation is predicated on our "already-being-in-the-world." Understanding is guided by a preparatory grasp of what it is to understand. Understanding is based upon preunderstandings.

Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time* (1927), radicalized the traditional presuppositions of being, where being was conceived as universal, indefinable and self-evident. The issue for Heidegger was not to try to secure presuppositionlessness as the natural sciences hoped to do but instead to unfold and reveal these fore-structures of understanding.

Heidegger's conception of the hermeneutic circle describes how circularity underlies all understanding. The point is to raise a vague and unclear understanding to a more explicit concept by making an initial sketch of what it is that is to be understood and to circle over and over again this staked out terrain. With each new pass over the same ground, the presuppositions from where the question was first set out are unfolded and penetrated. Heidegger's hermeneutics is the working out of prior understandings; it uncovers because it brings us to stand anew in the place where we already are.

It is the recovery of a prior understanding for which we have hitherto lacked the words (Caputo, 1987, pp. 36-91).

In Heidegger's later works he claimed that the hermeneutic circle was not radical enough. According to Heidegger, the image of the circle still suggested a transcendental and methodological gesture, a kind of prior subjective determination. He came to see the work of hermeneutics as a recovery of that sense of the world before it was made distant by objectification. Human beings stand always and already in the world but this nearness, this closeness has been distanced by modern technology (Caputo, 1987, p. 95).

The hermeneutic movement, in his view, was not a question of finding an appropriate vocabulary to capture this essence of the relationship nor was it to determine, once and for all, a final formulation of meaning and truth. Instead, the project was to recover that belonging in which we already stand. Heidegger wanted to make his way back to the primordial relationship between Being and human being and to bring it to words, not words about it but words spoken from it. The only appropriate way he could see to achieving this recovery was to surrender the pursuit of objectivism in order to establish contact with this originary relationship (Caputo, 1987, pp. 95-119; Oh, 1986, pp. 8-12).

Gadamer

Hans-Georg Gadamer began his philosophical work from Heidegger's fundamental standpoints in *Being and Time*: preunderstanding, the hermeneutic circle, and the phenomenological theory of horizons. He made these the basis of his philosophical hermeneutics, the philosophy of retrieval (Caputo, 1987, p. 95). Following Heidegger, Gadamer rejected the Enlightenment position that human reason can free itself from prejudice, bias, and tradition. According to Gadamer, all reason, all understanding, and all

knowing are bound to historical contexts and inevitably involve some prejudice, pre-judging and pre-understandings. Prejudice is what gives the hermeneutical movement its strength (Bernstein,1983, p. 127). Challenging the tenets of radical Cartesian doubt, Gadamer claimed that there can be no knowledge or understanding without prejudices.

Gadamer claims that it is impossible to theoretically bracket off all prejudices and presuppositions to arrive at transparent self-knowledge. Instead, he argues, it is only through the dialogical encounter with that which is alien, strange and confusing that we can open ourselves to examine prejudices of which we might not otherwise be aware. The Cartesian dream of certainty is impossible, we can never escape from the obligation of seeking to validate claims to truth through argumentation and opening ourselves to the criticism of others (Bernstein, 1983, p.168). We are always and already grounded in our own situation, and it is only through a fusion of this horizon of understanding with "the other" that we can enlarge and enrich our own horizon. Gadamer sees the risking and testing of our prejudices through dialogues with the other (person, text, work of art) to be a constant life-long task and not something that is ever finally achieved.

As well as challenging the Enlightenment contrast between reason and authority, Gadamer questioned the opposition between reason and tradition. According to Gadamer, we can no more escape our traditions than we can step out of our skins. All reason, he believes, functions within tradition. If we are to inquire into our prejudices we must turn to the past, to our traditions and to the proper authorities (knowledge) which implant these prejudices (Bernstein, 1983, p. 130). As Gadamer sees it, we belong to tradition, language and history before they belong to us. We are influenced by tradition, prejudices and authority even when we think we are free of them.

The outstanding theme in Gadamer's hermeneutics is the fusion of interpretation, understanding and application into the hermeneutic experience. Through his treatment of the Aristotelian notion of phronesis, Gadamer clarifies how every act of understanding involves interpretation and all interpretation involves application. Phronesis is a sense of what is required in the concrete situation, a knowledge which cannot be reduced to formalized knowledge and rendered explicit in the terms of rules. Like moral knowledge, hermeneutic judgement takes on meaning and significance only in the concrete situation (Bernstein, 1983, pp. 38-39; Caputo, 1983, pp. 109-110). Adopting the concept of phronesis enables us to "gain a critical perspective on our own historical situation which is under constant threat by technology, a false idolatry of the expert and an undermining of practical and political reason required to make responsible decisions" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 174).

Habermas

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics drew criticism from Jürgen Habermas who believed it inadequate to the task of understanding in the social and political disciplines. According to Habermas, philosophical hermeneutics lacks an explicit critical function, which he feels is vital for an adequate social theory. Habermas feels that an explicit critical function is required to do justice to the role of power in the understanding of culture and society, in addition to a hermeneutic interpretation of meaning. As opposed to Gadamer, who tended to contrast scientific method with the hermeneutic movement, Habermas argued for a dialectical synthesis of empirical-analytic science and hermeneutics into a critical theory that has a practical intent and is governed by an emancipatory cognitive interest (Bernstein, 1983, pp. 41-44). Habermas regards Gadamer's neo-Aristotelianism concept of phronesis as inadequate to the task of gaining

clarity about critical standards for guiding praxis in contemporary times (Bernstein, 1983, pp. 188-189).

As well as elucidating the three primary cognitive interests -- the technical, the practical and the emancipatory, Habermas was interested in developing an emancipatory praxis based on a theory of communicative action which would uncover the universal conditions that are presupposed in all ideal speech acts. For Habermas, the condition for all understanding in speech acts is determining the validity claims made by participants in communicative action. Like Gadamer, Habermas was battling the hegemony of technical reason which he says gives false authority to the rule of experts, social engineers and technocracts whose practices distort, inhibit or prevent the universal ideal of unconstrained communication (Bernstein, 1983, pp. 214-228).

Ricoeur

Paul Ricoeur, like Gadamer, considered hermeneutics to be concerned with the understanding of being and the relations between human beings. The principal features of Ricoeur's hermeneutic theories are derived from the characteristics of written discourse: the text. Ricoeur "takes the *text* to be the paradigm of hermeneutical theory" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 130). He feels that he can resolve the tension between what had historically been assumed to be the contradictory attitudes of explanation and understanding with his textual theory of interpretation. In his key notion of distanciation, he observes that, in contrast to oral discourse, written discourse is addressed to an absent and unknown audience.

By distancing the meaning of written discourse from a simple return to the alleged intention of the author and also from the social and historical conditions of its production, Ricoeur gives the text an intention of its own.

Granting the text this independence from its authorial and historical source allows the reader to treat the text as a worldless and authorless object, to explain it in terms of its internal relations, its structure. Ricoeur argues his structural movement depsychologises, as far as possible, the notion of interpretation, allowing for the inclusion of the explanatory attitude which had been the province of the natural sciences, as opposed to the human sciences, since Dilthey. The autonomous text, cut off from the intentions of the author and the conditions of its origin means that distanciation opens the text to "an unlimited series of readings" (Gallagher,1992, p. 131 quoting Ricoeur, 1981, p. 139). To understand a text in this manner is not to seek something hidden behind the text but instead something disclosed in front of it, that which points towards possibilities (Hoy, 1982, pp. 89-95; Ricoeur, 1983, pp. 13-21 & pp. 43-54).

Rorty

Richard Rorty offers a postmodern critique of both the critical project of Habermas and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Although sympathetic to Habermas' hope for undistorted communication, Rorty is critical of his desire for a universal theory on which to ground undistorted communication and conversation. Habermas, he says, shows his modernist inclinations by believing he must dignify contingent social practices that have been worked out over the centuries with something that pretends to be more solid and substantial (Caputo, 1987, p. 197). On the other hand, Rorty considers Gadamer's talk of an entirely different notion of truth and knowledge that is revealed through hermeneutical understanding to be a form of mystification. From his perspective, both Gadamer and Habermas still cling to the hope that philosophy or its "successor" can be a foundational discipline of culture. Rorty believes we

must "admit that its best philosophy is just another voice in the conversation of mankind" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 6).

Siding with the strong textualists, Rorty sees philosophy and other disciplines as historical and cultural devices we have developed over time for ways of coping with the mystery of life. Rorty's pragmatism asks us not to place our hopes and beliefs in any one discipline but instead to consider these disciplines as voices in an ongoing conversation about how we can best cope with the problems of life. This means we should turn away from the false metaphysical or epistemological comfort of believing that these practices are grounded on something fundamental. Instead our task, as Rorty sees it, is to defend the openness of human conversation against all those temptations and real threats that seek closure (Bernstein, 1983; Gallagher, 1992).

Derrida

According to Caputo (1987), Jacques Derrida exploits the radically deconstructive side of Heidegger's hermeneutics and directs it against the "metaphysics of presence." Derrida challenges Heidegger by putting into question the very terms by which Heidegger seeks to overcome metaphysics. Being, meaning, truth, are for Derrida, so many produced effects, which it would be naïve not to reduce. Like Nietzche, Derrida claims that we create as many truths as we require. Derrida says it is an illusion to believe in a single truth, a single meaning; yet his deconstruction does not unleash confusion and anarchy as is often claimed. It releases other, different readings that may have been excluded, repressed or devalued by the dominant discourse.

Deconstruction is ongoing, unfinished work, not a position but an activity, its task being to keep the ruling discourse in question, to expose its vulnerability and the tensions by which it is torn. Derrida's thesis of deconstruction means

that "whatever unities of meaning are constituted in natural language, whatever normalized form experience assumes, whatever institutionalization our practices receive, all are vulnerable, alterable, contingent" (Caputo, 1987, p. 144). Derrida interrogates entrenched authority, the established powers that be, reminding us that all such authorities, all such "truths" are contingent formations, constituted products. He also recognizes that we cannot function unless we cope with this "disseminative drift" by imposing normality, by grounding ourselves in something to still and quiet the flux. Deciding which of the discourses and practices we should settle on, Derrida believes, is something that should be determined in open and free debate.

Caputo

John Caputo's radical hermeneutics (1987) is an attempt to deconstruct Western metaphysics which claims a kind of interest-free rationality. According to Caputo, we must avoid the easy way out of metaphysics and "restore life to its original difficulty." None of us, he suggests, occupy a privileged place of understanding from which to interpret the world. Acknowledging that lack of privileged insight is central to those who practice radical hermeneutics.

Caputo believes we are faced not only with the problem of what we can know, but also the problem of what we are to do. He argues that hermeneutic action takes its point of departure "not from fixed points of reference and steady principles as in metaphysical arguments but [instead] . . . from the breakdown of standpoints and resting points" (Caputo, p. 238). Caputo wants to describe the "fix" we are in, to write from "below," not from theory, not from some transcendental high ground but from the ruptures, gaps, textures and differences which inhabit everything we think and do and hope for. For Caputo, hermeneutics means "coping with the flux, tracing out a world in slippage"

(Caputo, 1987, p. 37). Radical hermeneutics as such, challenges the notion that human affairs can finally be formalized into explicit rules. Rather, "the concern is to keep the conversation moving, mobile . . . and [to see] that no one's voice is excluded or demeaned (Caputo, p. 261) as we confront the uncertainty of things we seek to understand.

A Commentary on Contemporary Hermeneutics

This brief survey shows that in its origins and its contemporary practices, the term hermeneutics is used in many different senses. Gallagher (1992) draws distinctions among what he defines as four different orientations of contemporary hermeneutic inquiry. These are conservative hermeneutics, critical hermeneutics, moderate hermeneutics, and radical hermeneutics. Crusius (1991) offers a different taxonomy defining five different types of hermeneutic interpretation: naïve or natural, normative, scientific, philosophical or ontological and negative or depth. In Crusius' classification, naïve or natural hermeneutics are the everyday, mostly unreflective interpretations people employ when communicative understanding breaks down while normative hermeneutics is the deliberate discipline for a "priestly" caste of specialists (Crusius, 1991, p. 5). Although these two types of hermeneutic endeavor will always be with us, according to Crusius, the focus in modern times is more upon scientific, ontological and depth hermeneutics.

For the purposes of my study I will adopt the terms technical, ontological, critical and radical hermeneutics. These terms will allow a synthesis of Crusius' and Gallagher's interpretations of the hermeneutic tradition. Since a working conception of hermeneutics is necessary to the conduct of my research, I will continue to use this terminology to discuss hermeneutic approaches in the remainder of the thesis.

Technical hermeneutics

Gallagher's conservative and Crusius' scientific hermeneutics both refer to a technical hermeneutics. Technical hermeneutics is concerned with the reproduction of meaning aiming at the recovery of the original meaning of the text. Expressed within technical hermeneutics is the hope that with the appropriate methodology, researchers can transcend their cultural and historical situations in order to arrive at meaning that is stable and objectively free from human interests and linguistic influences. Technical hermeneutics is represented in work of Emilio Betti and E.D. Hirsch (Crusius, 1991; Gallagher, 1992). Its focus on the suspension of the interpreter's assumptions and the recovery of the author's intentions is closely tied to the empirical-analytic paradigm. In this sense, it is inappropriate for this study of learning disability, because its "disinterested stance" is part of what I am objecting to in my critique of the history and contemporary practices of learning disability research.

Ontological hermeneutics

Philosophical or ontological hermeneutics is "a general philosophy of human existence which holds that interpreting is not so much what human beings . . . do, but rather what all human beings are, namely interpreters" (Crusius, 1991, p. 5). What Gallagher calls moderate hermeneutics appears to be similar to what Crusius considers ontological or philosophical hermeneutics. This kind of hermeneutics has been developed by philosophers such as Gadamer and Ricoeur who "contend that no method can guarantee an absolute interpretation . . . because, as readers [and researchers] we are bound by prejudices of our own historical existence . . . and language" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 9). Ontological hermeneutics, because it acknowledges that we can never reach a complete or

objective interpretation, is a much different kind of hermeneutics than technical hermeneutics which suggests that an objective interpretation is both attainable and permanent.

The work of ontological hermeneutics is to "recover that sense of the world before it was disrupted by objectifying thinking, to restore the sense of what is close before it was made distant by objectification" (Gadamer, p. 96). That recovery, according to Gadamer, is to be found in the event of the conversation. In this study, my task is to try to reveal what has been held in check by the objectification of children and learning. My question is ontological, asking after the meaning of being: "What is it that allows us to create a category of children called learning disabled and to objectify them in this way?" Because I intend to explore this question in a spirit of openness in a dialogical conversation with the participants in the study and later in reflection with the text, my research orientation is closely tied to ontological hermeneutics. This ontological orientation will be discussed at greater length later in the chapter.

Radical hermeneutics

The remaining two hermeneutic approaches Gallagher speaks of are the critical and the radical. Crusius reduces these two types to one, which he terms depth or negative hermeneutics. Because this study is, in part, set within a postmodernist critique, I shall to follow the distinction which Gallagher and Caputo make between radical and critical hermeneutics.

Radical hermeneutics has its origins in the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger and is practised in the deconstructive work of Derrida and Caputo, and in the postmodern theorizing of Foucault and Lyotard. The purpose of radical hermeneutics is not to turn towards the origin or to decipher a hidden truth in the text, but instead to release a multiplicity of readings, to keep the truth

of the text constantly in question. In this sense, deconstruction or radical hermeneutics is an ongoing, always unfinished task, not a position but an action.

Radical hermeneutics deconstructs the words of the text, not to cause anarchy or destruction but to resist and interrogate the dominant discourse in order to "break with established rules [and] to think in a new ground-breaking, radical way" (Caputo, p. 21). In this way, radical hermeneutics questions whether there is anything originary other than "our linguistic illusions." The project of radical hermeneutics is to show "that the whole project of a transcendental, a priori history is inherently dependent upon language and signs" (Caputo, p. 123). It maintains that original or foundational meaning is unattainable, that everything is always in flux and that there is no permanent truth beyond language itself.

However, the intention of radical hermeneutics is not to establish an alternate or correct interpretation; rather it hopes to show that all understanding is temporal, situational and contingent. Because the task of radical hermeneutics is "to keep the ruling discourse in question" -- in this case, the empirical-analytic tradition in learning disability -- "to expose its vulnerability and the tensions by which it is torn" (Caputo, p. 194) radical hermeneutics offers the kind of inquiry needed in this study. (Radical hermeneutics will be explored in greater depth in the last part of this chapter.)

Critical hermeneutics

Critical hermeneutics has been developed in the writings of critical theorists such as Habermas. It is employed "as a means of penetrating false consciousness, discovering the ideological nature of our belief systems, promoting distortion-free communication, and thereby accomplishing a

liberating consensus" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 11). Although critical hermeneutics calls for a "suspicious interpretation of those ideologies and institutions which support and maintain ruling power structures" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 240) and in that sense is related to philosophical and radical hermeneutics, it is also similar to technical hermeneutics in the sense that it implies that there is a way to arrive at a neutral, ideologically-free interpretation.

"Critical hermeneutics . . . attempts to get to the objective truth behind the false consciousness of ideology" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 240). It contends that what usually passes for truth is ideologically distorted and therefore a depth or more distrustful hermeneutics is needed to penetrate our false ideals. There is a belief that, through projects such as the "unconstrained or ideal communication" of Habermas, the psychoanalysis of Freud, or the theories of political and economic inequities of Marx that we can be liberated from the false ideologies and beliefs that control and constrain our daily lives. In other words, critical hermeneutics suggests that as humans we have the capability to step out of our culture, our situation, our history and most significantly, our language to arrive at distortion-free understanding and "nonlinguistic, material emancipation" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 11).

Critical hermeneutics is undeniably a seductive notion in the sense that it promises a place and a time where and when we can escape the oppressive forces of false ideology and false consciousness. However, a radical and an ontological critique cast doubt on the possibility of finding a secure refuge in a transcendental truth of a critical orientation.

Ontological hermeneutics would respond to the critical movement by pointing out that although the identification of the oppressive influences in our lives is undeniably important, such a consciousness-raising activity can only be accomplished in an ongoing communication which "always demands a

continuing exchange of views and statements but never claims a privileged ideological neutrality" (Gallagher, p. 18 quoting Gadamer, 1976, p. 315). In other words, we can never escape or disconnect ourselves from the situations in which we are immersed. There is no place for a person "to stand outside or apart from this history-which-we-are. [Rather] we are caught up in our history, [our language and our culture], messy contingency, imprecision, mere opinion and endless controversy" (Crusius, 1991, pp. 5 & 13), in short, everything that defines us as beings-in-the-world. Critical hermeneutics promises a deferred classless society and unimpeded communication -- essentially a Utopia, a "nonplace, where no one can dwell" (Crusius, 1991, p. 19).

Radical hermeneutics would accuse critical hermeneutics of being just another metaphysical scheme which focusses on a never-quite-yet-being-world of ideal consensus or emancipation from false consciousness. It would argue that the "whole metaphysical concept of [deferred] truth requires deconstruction [and] that there is no ultimate escape from false consciousness [nor] any resolution to the hermeneutical situation [such as] communism, psychoanalytic cure, [or] ideal consensus" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 22). In other words, it is an illusion to think there is a "transcendental high ground" or a totalizing scheme which purports how to run everything.

In chapter two of this thesis I tried to show the limitations of critical theory in terms of its research into learning disability. Although the creation of the category of learning disabled children may well be a class-based phenomenon, nevertheless, such an analysis provides little understanding of the day to day educational lives of these children or the teachers who work with them in schools. Critical hermeneutics lacks the interpretive possibilities needed to inquire more deeply into the meaning of learning disability that is intended in this study.

Charting My Route Through Ontological and Radical Hermeneutics

The role of conversation in hermeneutic inquiry

For Gadamer (1989), the essential nature of hermeneutic interpretation can be understood through the metaphor of a conversation. Gadamer radicalizes the field of interpretation by replacing the idea of "methodology" with the notion of "dialogue." The question is, why the move to dialogue rather than observation or analysis? In part, dialogue or conversation can help to break down the subject-object dichotomy. Participants in a conversation are not objects, rather they are active subjects co-inquiring with the investigator into the matter under discussion. Because understanding is exclusively a human event, bounded by one's situation and history, Gadamer believes meaning cannot be found through strict application of a method which stands outside the world of the question.

Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics "throws into fundamental question the whole idea of method as a privileged access to truth" (Crusius, 1991, p. 37). Because we are immersed in and bounded by our own history, culture and language, we are inextricably involved in the act of interpretation. To understand that interpretation cannot be reduced to a methodology, to realize that interpretation is a profoundly human way of being-in-the-world, is to move towards a more philosophical hermeneutics. It is a "reflection on interpretation, a theory of what happens whenever we understand anything" (Crusius, 1991, p. 6). Understanding, because it is always coming into being, "is to be found in the event of conversation" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 21).

On the other hand, method seems to know in advance exactly where it is going and how to assure its findings will be replicated. Method is closed to novelty, difference and surprise. If we think of hermeneutics as the seeking of

meaning, truth or consensual understanding through interpretation modelled on dialogue or conversation, it is helpful to think of understanding as "the conversation we are in as one that never ends" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 349). In this larger sense, Gadamer speaks of the notion of conversation as a guiding metaphor for hermeneutic interpretation. He contends that understanding a text and reaching an understanding between people in a conversation is a common activity because "both are concerned with a subject matter that is placed before them. Just as the interlocutor is trying to reach agreement on some subject with his partner, so is the interpreter. . . trying to understand what the text is saying" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 378). By using conversation, albeit in a metaphorical sense, Gadamer encourages a participatory, dialogical orientation to guide our thinking as we approach the text we want to understand.

My study is oriented towards conversation in both a literal and a figurative sense. First, I hold a series of actual conversations with teacher-participants. Subsequently, I try to orient myself in a dialogical manner to an interpretive reflection on the original conversations (with the help of audio tape transcriptions) and the research literature on learning disability.

On the more practical level, it is necessary to be somewhat more precise about what is meant by a research conversation and what relationship it has to inquiring into the meaning of learning disability. Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines conversation as "an oral exchange of opinions, sentiments, observations, ideas." The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (1966) provides a sixteenth century definition -- "familiar discourse" as well as an originary meaning -- from the Latin *conversari*- "associating familiarly with." Samuel Johnson draws a distinction between talk and conversation: "We had talk enough but no conversation; nothing was discussed." Although the words talk and conversation are often used synonymously, the distinction that Johnson

draws our attention to seems an appropriate one, especially for the purposes of a research conversation. To converse means to discuss, to speak about together, to exchange ideas. When people converse, something substantive is usually discussed. On the other hand, talking may content itself more with idle chatter. There is also more of a recognition of the presence of the other person in a conversation; you talk *to*, while you converse *with*.

Qualitative research studies have traditionally made use of interviews. An interview is similar to a conversation because in both people are coming together, face to face, to communicate with one another. *Interview*, according to Webster's means to "question or converse with in order to obtain information or ascertain personal qualities." A research conversation, as I see it, has something of the interview about it since its intent is both to question and to converse. Questions that may be asked in a research conversation such as, "How long have you been teaching LD children?", "How did it come about that you are now a teacher of the learning disabled?", "From a teacher's point of view, how would you describe a learning disabled student?" "Could you tell me a bit more about what you mean by the term processing difficulty?" also show an interest in obtaining information. Yet an interview is more one-sided than a conversation; there is less give and take; roles are more clearly defined; you have an interviewer as an active subject and an interviewee as the object of the investigation. In a conversation, however, you have interlocutors; roles are therefore more fluid. A conversation is more of a dialogue where there is an *exchange* of information, thoughts and ideas; an exchange is less likely to occur in an interview. This interactive nature of a conversation seem to make it suitable for research questions which are interpretive in nature.

But how does a research conversation differ from an "ordinary" conversation? Most of what I have said so far about conversations would be

applicable to research conversations. Yet a research conversation is different from the kind of a conversation a person might have over coffee with a friend. In a research conversation the sense of purpose is quite clearly established; it is directed towards a re-search, a new search of something that is relevant to the participants in the conversation. As I understand it, a research conversation as I describe it, aims at what Gadamer would consider to be a "true" conversation. Gadamer speaks of conducting a genuine conversation as an "art."

> To conduct a conversation requires first of all that the partners to it do not talk at cross purposes. Hence its necessary structure is that of question and answer. . . . Dialectic, as the art of asking questions, proves itself only because the person who knows how to ask questions is able to preserve his orientation towards openness. . . . The first condition of the art of conversation is to ensure that the other person is with us. . . . To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the object to which the partners in the conversation are directed. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 330)

In a true conversation what is to be understood, for example, "What is it that allows us to consider certain children as learning disabled?", is what guides the conversation. What is demanded of the partners in the conversation is mutual respect, a genuine interest in hearing the other's voice and a willingness to work together to develop understandings.

Gadamer goes on to say how understanding is achieved through a dialogical encounter with the other.

> What emerges in [a conversation, a dialectic of question and answer] is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the subjective opinions of the partners to the dialogue that even the person leading the conversation is always ignorant. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 331)

It is clear, from Gadamer, that a true conversation is not simply a meaning-communicating activity; it is more of a meaning-making or -revealing undertaking. In this regard, the conversation may often take an unexpected

turn, leading to novel ideas that may surprise the partners. This unexpectedness happens when we "develop an openness to risk and test our own opinions through such an encounter" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 162). This means that the researcher requires a sensitivity within the moment of conversation as well as within reflection, a sensitivity to bring the unspoken into articulation. It means attending to the silences as well as the sounds -- being aware of the "off-stage voices" (Rosen, 1985) within and alongside each utterance. Residues of disagreement, uncertainty, and doubt may also have to be sought out. The researcher needs to remember, as Ursula Franklin in her 1990 radio broadcast "The Real World of Technology", informs us,

> that not everything is plannable. In prescriptive technology, planning means "arranging beforehand"; here there are planners and there are plannees, those who make the plans and those who are subjected to the plans. [On the other hand] holistic planning, [planning that is considerate of the participants in the plan] needs quite a different kind of planning. Here we need to plan for the unplannable. This does not mean a surrender to randomness but a kind of planning requiring situational judgements, experience, knowledge, and discernment where the context is taken seriously. (Franklin, 1990a)

Gadamer (1989) tells us that to understand means to understand differently. We will see things differently in light of our changing horizons and in terms of the questions we pose. Therefore, in conversation, both with people and the way we orient ourselves towards texts one never finds absolute and perfect knowledge. Instead one participates in conversations at various interpretive sites to find "imperfect" and incomplete interpretations which are constantly ongoing (Gallagher, 1992, pp. 347-348).

The challenge in hermeneutic inquiry is in learning to ask the right questions (true questions whose answers have not been settled in advance) and drawing on the resources of our own horizons in order to better listen to and understand the other so we may more fully understand what it is that we are

inquiring into. "In order to be able to ask [authentic questions], one must want to know, and that means knowing that one does not know" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 363). Collingwood, quoted in Gadamer (1989), argues that we "can understand a text only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer" (p. 370). What this means to me is that in hermeneutic reflection, with the text of the conversations, I must "listen" very attentively to the participants' words to try to determine the larger, "historically effected" questions (that is, our cultural-historical legacies that speak through us within the conversations) in order to more fully understand the meaning of learning disability.

Sometimes, however, we do not have to wait for the "reflection which follows the conversation" to inquire more deeply into the question. At times these moments of insight occur within the actual conversations as we give ourselves over to the questions which engage us. These flashes of insights are what allow us to ask more meaningful questions in the event of the conversation. This is what keeps the conversation alive, what keeps the participants engaged, what prevents the conversation from turning into an interview or from falling into a mere exchange of opinions. These questions we try to reconstruct on the spot or later in reflection do not, however, have as much to do with the mental experiences of the participants as they do with the larger question which animates us: "What it is that allows us to create a category of children as learning disabled?"

Prejudices as conditions of understanding

The truth for ontological hermeneutics is always truth for being-in-the-world in some time and in some place. In other words, truth is an historical and situational concept as opposed to the dominant empirical-analytic theory of truth

as objective and universal. Against this Enlightenment notion of truth, as one that sees human prejudice or preunderstanding as a barrier to truth, Gadamer argues that

> the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word [that is, prejudgments], constitute the initial directness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. . . . It is not so much our judgements as it is our prejudgments that constitute our being. (Gadamer, 1976, quoted in Crusius, 1991, p. 34)

Gadamer shows that to understand is already to exist in preunderstandings. Before we come to understand something, we already have some conception of the thing we are attempting to understand. To pretend that we have no preunderstandings at all or to try and remove what we think they might be is an impossible task to try to perform within the monological model of scientific objectivism. In Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics, the idea is not to try to "bracket subjective prejudices and to push lived-with things of our life-world out to arm's length where they can be safely observed without involvement" (Crusius, 1991, p. 37). Instead, the hermeneutic task, as Gadamer sees it, is "to elucidate the distinctive type of knowledge and truth that is realized whenever we authentically understand" (Bernstein, 1986, p. 89). To do this, Gadamer proposes to work from within one's prejudices. His point is that we should allow our prejudices to be challenged by "opening [ourselves] to partners in dialogue whose horizons differ from our own" (Crusius, 1991, p. 37).

Heidegger, with his notion of the circle of understanding, agrees that "an interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 150, quoted in Gallagher, 1991, p. 61). The image of the circular movement is important because it shows that understanding, just as it depends on preunderstandings that come before, never comes to closure or completeness after one has come to a certain kind of

understanding. There is, in effect, no true beginning or end to human understanding because it is based on the finitude of human experience. For Gadamer, "human understanding involves a constant temporal process of revision; . . . it is always an incomplete interpretation because of the existential temporal structures of human existence" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 62).

In maintaining that circularity underlies all understanding, Heidegger and Gadamer argue that interpretations cannot be isolated from our prejudgments; they cannot exist outside the preunderstandings in which we always and already stand. The issue, therefore, is not to try and arrive at interpretations which are supposedly free of presuppositions but rather to try and unfold the preunderstandings themselves, to try to open up what was previously closed. The point is not to try to remove preconceptions of the researcher/writer but to see how these fore-structures belong to the very possibility of knowing.

This action of foregrounding our prejudices, however, is not to be considered merely a nostalgic search for something we once had, but have lost over the years. It is instead a retrieval which pushes forward, which aims at the emergence of something new. The forward movement of hermeneutic recovery is a circling back to recover possibilities for what may have once been and could yet be.

> . . . tradition is not merely what one knows to be and is conscious of as one's own origins . . . . Changing the established forms is no less a kind of connection with the tradition than defending the established forms. Tradition exists only in constant alteration. (Gadamer, 1971, quoted in Hoy, 1982, p. 127)

Hermeneutic understanding uncovers because it brings us to stand in the place we already are (Caputo, 1987; Hoy, 1982). We can see that the hermeneutic conversation is a powerful metaphor for the working out of both prior and possible understandings. The conversation "moves in two directions -

- back towards our preunderstandings, for nothing expresses them better than dialogue with someone whose prejudices do not merely reinforce our own, and forward, towards achieving a common [or at least different] understanding" (Crusius, 1991, p. 38). This forward movement is what Gadamer calls the "fusion of horizons." Understanding happens in "the between" of the conversation, between "my" horizon and the horizon of the other. It happens as we try to enlarge our horizons by "incorporating the insights of the other, even as the other is challenged by what we seek and assert" (Crusius, 1991, p. 39). However, Gadamer tells us, this fusion of horizons cannot occur without the movement back into our prejudgments which are tested in the event of the conversation.

There is no proving or disproving in hermeneutics in the conventional sense but only a certain letting-be-seen in which we find or fail to recognize ourselves in the account. Ontological hermeneutics "tends to think of truth as something we listen for rather than look for" (Crusius, 1991, p. 33). There are no explicit rules to fall back upon as there are in the natural sciences which operate under the assumption that we can come up with a pure, interest-free methodology. But even though hermeneutic "truth" may be tentative, local and temporary it is still understanding differently than we did before, not a total understanding, but perhaps better understanding. Hermeneutic inquiry succeeds if it brings to words what we understand to be true about ourselves, but perhaps have been unable to express.

The question of the other

For Gadamer, (1989) it is in and through the encounter with art, texts, and especially tradition that we can gain insight into our prejudices, discovering which are blind prejudices and which are enabling. It is through a dialogical

encounter with "the other," with that which may seem alien, strange and confusing that we can open ourselves to examine prejudices of which we might not otherwise be aware. Admitting the open character of our prejudices as necessary conditions for understanding helps us realize our inevitable situatedness in tradition. Because we are always and already grounded in our own situation, it is only through a fusion of horizons with the other that we can enlarge and enrich our horizons.

Michelfelder, (1989) however, problematizes this "attunement towards the other." She draws our attention to a distinction between Gadamer's and Derrida's attitude towards "the other." Gadamer indicates that "the literal meaning of *Ver-stehen* [is to] stand in the place of the other directly, as advocate, not amanuensis" (Michelfelder, 1989, p. 47), that is to say, that the person who stands in for the other does not merely repeat what the other has said but instead speaks for him. This means "grasping what the other really wants to say so that one [can] make a stronger defence of the other than the other is capable of doing" (Michelfelder, 1989, p. 51).

Derrida, on the other hand, rather than speaking for the other, lets the other speak. He does not take the place of the other as Gadamer tries to do when he opens himself to the possibility "that the other might be right and one might be wrong" (Michelfelder, 1989, p. 53).

Both Gadamer and Derrida are oriented towards the other, both are attuned towards the other, both listen attentively. Gadamer, out of a position of trust, tries to speak for the other while Derrida, maintaining a position of suspicion, demands that the other speak for "itself." In trying to maintain both a position of trust and a position of suspicion in my research I attempt to listen to the voices of both Gadamer and Derrida as I inquire into the meaning of

learning disability. (This is discussed more fully in the section entitled "Hermeneutics of Suspicion.")

The "others" in my study are several: the teacher participants; the LD discourse that is not immediately apparent in the conversation but nevertheless, has informed those of us who inquire into its meaning: and, of course, the learning disabled students who, although not literally present in the conversation, are the ones for whom we are responsible as teachers.

The teachers of learning disabled students are the immediate others with whom I dialogue in this study. In part, it is their situational meanings I wish to understand. This understanding will only come about through attentive listening. There is always the risk in any research study of becoming so absorbed in our own questions that we fail to hear the comments of the other. We forget to open our ears to the words of the other and then lose or distort what it is they are trying to say. In this regard, it is necessary to display an openness towards the others' views, to pay attention to their claims, to value their unique attitudes. In this study I try to maintain an attitude of trust in the conversations and in my reflection towards the teacher-participants; I try to believe they have something to teach me -- something I do not know or something they may know in a "better" or a different way.

To understand teachers' meanings of learning disability is to be attentive to what they have to say. This is not only a careful listening of the words that are communicated in the dialogue but also an attentive listening for words not spoken -- a listening for what is imaginable within the words. In this way, I attune myself towards the other participants in my study by acting or speaking for them, in a Gadamerian sense, as I listen for possibilities which lie before us.

However, in attending to the other -- the teachers with whom I converse in this study, and the learning disability discourse which surrounds and informs

our conversation -- there is the danger of neglecting to hear the voice of the absent other, the one we call the learning disabled child. What I see as a central question in this inquiry is how to attend to the other who is not present in our discussions, the one who is not there to speak for him or herself. Responding to this concern means more than talking *about* the children in their absence, rather it means allowing the teacher or me to speak *for* the child, to be the advocate. This is an ethical stance where we, as advocates, tell the child's story as we see it, defending the other (the child) as best we can in conversation -- both in the asking of and the responding to questions.

As well as speaking for the child we need to allow LD children to speak for themselves. This means allowing opportunities for their voices to emerge during the conversations. To be truly concerned with the question of "what it is that allows us to consider certain children learning disabled?" is basically to read these children into the conversations. In so doing we acknowledge their presence; we let them enter the conversation. However faint and remote their voices may seem at times we have an ethical responsibility to attend to the children as we pursue the question.

To keep our attention on the central research question -- "what is it that allows us to create a category called learning disability and to see certain children as learning disabled?" means that establishing a different kind of attunement towards the other will be necessary. There must also be a consideration of the dominant discourse about learning disability as "the other," especially the discourse that speaks in its defence. In chapter two of this study I examined the learning disability literature in an effort to trace its origins and history. This initial research was carried with me as I entered the conversations with the teachers and, as such, became part of what Gadamer calls my fore-understanding, my prejudices about learning disability. But as well as being

part of my own (and the participants' prejudices), this discourse is a powerful voice on its own; it is a dominant "other" and it, as Derrida implies, must defend itself as I pursue the question of the meaning of learning disability. The ethical stance, as I see it, would not be to *speak for* the "master narrative" of learning disability as Gadamer might suggest, but to "interrogate entrenched authority" as Caputo would have it (Caputo, 1987, p. 145) -- to insist that the discourse *speak for itself*, to have it respond to the understandings that have surfaced during the conversations, in short, that it, as the dominant and regulatory voice, be made to open its ears and listen to the voices from below.

Understanding as application

Hermeneutic understanding problematizes the notion of application for those of us schooled within a technical rationality. There is a generally held belief, albeit largely an unexamined one, that understanding precedes application, that one must understand something before one can apply that understanding. Within particular technical skills such as sewing on a button or painting a house, it is perhaps true that knowing how to do a thing before one actually does it aids the person in his or her task. However, even there, the actual experience dictates to a certain extent, just how the thing shall be done. The difficulty of specifying human action in advance of the actual situation becomes even more profound in the human sciences when we focus on people being with people, not only *Dasein* --being-in-the-world, but *Mitsein* -- being-in-the-world-with-others.

Responding to this difficulty, Gadamer rejected an earlier tradition which divided hermeneutics into three distinct categories of understanding, interpretation and application. Although he says the romantic movement in hermeneutics united interpretation and understanding, recognizing that

"interpretive language and concept[ual] understanding" . . . [belonged] to the inner structure of understanding, [this fusion] led to . . . application becoming wholly excluded from any connection with hermeneutics " (Gadamer, 1989, p. 307). He argues that understanding, interpretation and application are not separate categories -- that such division is, in fact, only an abstract distinction. He fuses the three into a single moment belonging to the process of hermeneutic understanding, contending that just as "understanding is always interpretation" (p. 307) so too is understanding always already application.

The importance that Gadamer attaches to application "is thus a function of his central principle that understanding is grounded in and constituted by a concrete, temporal-historical situation" (Hoy, 1982, p. 54). Essentially what Gadamer proposes (the unity of understanding and application) discredits the technical epistemology that suggests that first we "know" and then we "do" -- first come the theories which are then followed by the application of theory to practice. The problem, as Gadamer sees it, "is not [a technical] one of fitting preconceived notions to a situation, but of seeing *in the situation* what is happening and, most important, what is to be done" (Hoy, 1982, p. 54).

In an attempt to show the close relationship between understanding and application, Gadamer draws upon Aristotle's practical philosophy. Aristotle makes a distinction between phronesis (practical wisdom) and teche (technical know-how). Techne, the craftman's art, is a more universal and stable knowledge. It possesses a teachable knowledge, something that may be taught in advance of the particular situation to which it must be applied while phronesis, because it is concerned with something both particular and changeable, cannot be taught in advance. Gadamer, according to Hoy, (1982) believes his concept of application is similar to Aristotle's notion of phronesis since "it too does not mean applying something *to* something, as a craftsman

applies his mental conception to the physical material, but is rather a question of perceiving what is at stake in a given situation" (p. 58).

Earlier in this thesis, I attempted to show how the technical rationality has dominated the field of learning disability, how there has been a tendency to view practical/moral problems as technical problems, ones that could conceivably be solved outside the particular classroom in which people teach and learn. Techne, because it is more concerned with things than people, can perhaps afford to apply a universal theory whereas the "task of moral knowledge is to determine what the concrete situation asks of him" (Gadamer, 1989, p.313). According to Aristotle and Gadamer, to confuse phronesis with techne means we fail to consider what may be considered wise and morally appropriate in a particular human situation. If we accept Gadamer's hermeneutic model in terms of what it has to say to education, teaching, as an active and participatory act, is more closely aligned to phronesis than it is to techne. Appreciating that understanding and application are inextricably intertwined in the same pedagogic movement rather than as separate steps in a theoretical methodology allows us to escape the technical mentality that has heavily influenced education.

Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics gives understanding a dynamic nature: to understand is always to understand differently as our horizons broaden and change. This means that the text is always understood in a particular moment, in a certain situation in a new and different way. What this also means for the reader/researcher is that he or she must not stand "over against a situation [eg., a text] that he merely observes" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 314) Gadamer illustrates how questions of phronesis or moral knowledge may easily become distorted into questions of techne if we allow understanding and application to become divorced from one another:

> The interpreter dealing with a traditional text tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterwards uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text --i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 324)

Gadamer's return to Aristotelian ethics helps us realize that in much of the contemporary empirical-analytic research the interpreter has been alienated from the interpreted "by the objectifying method of modern science" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 314). His hermeneutics of understanding helps us realize that the interpreter belongs to the tradition he or she is interpreting and it also illustrates how understanding is an historical, situational event. By showing that "application happens in all reading so that the person who reads a text is himself within the meaning he apprehends," (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 199 quoting Gadamer, 1975) Gadamer helps the researcher in at least three important ways. First, he breaks down the subject-object dichotomy between the reader and the text (the interpreter and the interpreted) so that the two can work more in concert with one another through the event of conversation. Next, he gives hermeneutics a dynamic and temporal quality by admitting that future generations will understand differently than the researcher. In other words, all voices are allowed into the conversation; none are excluded and none are privileged. Gadamer also adds what could be considered a moral obligation to research by suggesting "what future generations will need to understand is precisely [a researcher's] understanding of the text: what he has added to the text, the self-application, is the possibility for future generations" (Weinsheimer, 1989, p. 199).

Hermeneutic reflection

Reflection means a turning back to thoughtfully consider some subject, matter, idea, or purpose often with a view towards casting light upon it, understanding it or seeing it in its right relations (Webster's Third New International Dictionary). In hermeneutic inquiry, there are a number of reflective moments. In this particular study, the first occurs within the event of the actual conversations between the researcher and the teacher-participants. Through a hermeneutic conversation with the other, in an attempt to move forward, to reach mutual understanding, we begin to become aware of our prejudices by turning back to our preunderstandings. Through the dialogic of question and answer, we are unable to stop ourselves from turning to our own preunderstandings as we attempt to understand the topic under discussion. Gadamer informs us that nothing exposes our prejudices more than a dialogue with a person whose prejudices are different from our own. Dialogue is the choice of natural over artificial languages, an opting for the unpredictable process of question and answer over method; it is a reflective inquiry into prejudice.

A second moment of hermeneutical reflection occurs outside the immediacy of the actual conversation. This is when the researcher carefully considers the transcriptions of the conversation text. Gadamer sees temporal distance as a positive and productive condition necessary for understanding.

> It is true that what a thing has to say, its intrinsic content, first appears only after it is divorced from the fleeting circumstances that give rise to it. . . . Temporal distance . . . lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully. . . . Often temporal distance can . . . distinguish the true prejudices by which we understand, from the false ones, by which we misunderstand. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 298)

This encounter with the text is still a dialogical one, where the text is "allowed to speak" and we can become aware of our blind and enabling prejudices. Away from the immediacy of the conversations, we can see what the text has to say to us now. Gadamer calls this awareness of the force of traditions (prejudices), hermeneutical reflection, a reflection on "historically effected consciousness."

> Reflection on a given preunderstanding brings before me something that otherwise happens 'behind my back'. Something -- but not everything, for what I have called . . . [historically effected consciousness] is inescapably more being than consciousness, and being is never fully manifest. [Only through hermeneutical reflection] do I learn to gain a new understanding of what I have seen through eyes conditioned by prejudice. (Gallagher, 1992, pp. 94-95 quoting Gadamer, 1970, p. 92)

Temporal distance allows us the opportunity to adopt a more "reflective cognitive stance that generally characterizes the theoretic attitude in the social sciences" (van Manen, 1990, p. 125). Distancing ourselves from the personal voices of the conversation to enter into a dialogical relationship with the text allows the space needed for reflection.

Van Manen stresses the importance of "mindful" writing in reflection. He argues that writing is closely fused into the research activity of social sciences and reflection itself.

> Writing fixes thoughts on paper. It externalizes what in some sense is internal; it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world. As we stare at the paper, and stare at what we have written, our objectified thinking now stares back at us. . . . The object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project: to make some aspect of our lived world, of our lived experience, reflectively understandable and intelligible. . . . Human science research requires a commitment to write . . . [and] is not just a supplementary activity. (van Manen, 1990, pp. 125-126)

We can see that hermeneutical reflection involves the dialectic of question and answer by which we become more aware of our preunderstandings; critical distanciation is also needed to achieve that heightened awareness. The distance provided by hermeneutic reflection helps the researcher gain as much interpretive insight as possible; it helps the researcher to tease out themes so that they, in turn, may become the object of further reflection. Hermeneutical reflection is what makes new understanding possible. Until we have listened for the truth of the text, until we have allowed it to speak to us and challenge our horizons, we have "not earned the privilege of deconstructing a living text" (Crusius, 1991, p. 40) which is another reflective dimension in the approach of radical hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics of suspicion

According to Caputo, Gadamer "is extremely good at defending the idea of a mobile, flexible tradition which never congeals into timeless, canonical formulations" (1987, p. 110), that is to say, Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics makes no claim of understanding grand truths which are timeless and universal, nor does it claim to be able to formulate a better post-Enlightenment idea of reason or to have the certainty of science. However, in the end, Caputo contends that although Gadamer "introduces as much change as possible into the philosophy of unchanging truth [and] as much movement as possible into immobile verity. . . [he] remains attached to tradition as the bearer of eternal truths" (1987, p. 111). In other words, Gadamer does not deny that there is eternal truth but instead proposes that there is no one final formulation of truth. What this suggests is that although Gadamer dismisses totalizing schemes of explanation, and in that sense shows his post-modernist stance, he reveals his

metaphysical tendencies by implicitly accepting "the metaphysical distinction between a more or less stable and objective *meaning* [of truth] and its ceaselessly changing *expression*" (p. 111). Caputo argues that Gadamer's project amounts to a strategy for a metaphysics of infinity:

> Gadamer puts the *logos* in time, the forms into historical matter, but he qualifies this with a Heideggerian factor of historical finitude. . . . The truth of the tradition is never put into question, only the dynamics of its communication, extension, renewal, and constant revivification. . . . His conception of the "finite" remains within a binary metaphysical opposition to the infinite, upon which his conception of finitude in fact depends. . . . The best way to protect and preserve the infinite resources of the tradition is to insist upon the finitude of any historical understanding of it. (Caputo, p. 112)

Postmodernist philosophers such as Derrida (in Kearney, 1984 & Brogan, 1989), Lyotard (1992, 1993), and Caputo (1987) would contend that Gadamer's hermeneutics is not "suspicious" enough. They question whether tradition is all that unified to begin with; furthermore, they ask how tradition is related to power relations and they inquire into how institutional practices and privileged discourses may support tradition.

Even though Gadamer does not consider consensual understanding to be permanent or universal, radical hermeneutics would still be suspicious of any end or final point, even if it was considered temporary. Radical hermeneutics wants to keep the questions open, wants to keep the play of heterogeneous meaning alive, wants to look for issues that have been pushed out of sight, wants to ensure that no one's voice is excluded. Caputo suggests that an agreed-upon standard, reached through the mutual understanding of Gadamer's hermeneutics, is not enough to offset the constellations of power and control. Instead, a deconstructive move is necessary, one "which requires vigilance about the subversion of discourse by a priori metaphysical schemes,

by exclusionary practices, by a rhetoric systematically bent on sustaining the prevailing order" (Caputo, 1987, p. 261).

Because the learning disability discourse is firmly lodged within a dominant empirical-analytic tradition, because the concept of learning disability has been uncritically accepted into our linguistic practices, (e.g., its assumed reality has gone largely unexamined), because it purports to do good for the other, it has been able to regulate and dominate the learning disability debate. Radical hermeneutics, with its self-assigned task of interrogating privileged voices "in the conversation of mankind," hopes to limit the power of such authoritative voices in order to further pluralism and to restore life to its original difficulty.

Gadamer's hermeneutic conversation of trust (here with teachers of learning disabled students) is where we must begin if we want to understand learning disability in more than a technical manner. The classroom where we are confronted by the practical immediacy of being-in-the-world with learning disabled children is ultimately where we must return at the end of this study. However, a radical, suspicious hermeneutic which looks beyond consensual understanding and unified truth, one that allows us to speak with a plurality of voices, one that lets us "describe the irregularities and differences by which we are inhabited" (Caputo, 1987, p. 6) cannot be neglected if we are to keep "the conversation of man" moving.

In the final analysis, the issue in hermeneutic inquiry is not the hermeneutics of suspicion against the hermeneutics of trust but instead the possibility of operating within and between the two different kinds of conversation -- the trusting communication which aims for consensus and the suspicious, agonistic debate which aims at paralogy (Gallagher, 1992). Both views are expressed in postmodernist thought and both together can offer a

perspective which allows us to speak to a discourse from within it, without total trust or total suspicion. Michelfelder (1989) puts it very nicely:

> Two hopes, two names -- Gadamer [hermeneutics of trust] and Derrida [hermeneutics of suspicion] -- and two ethical sensibilities, one attuned towards speaking for the other, and the other letting the other speak. This is a good deal for our ears to hear at once. Still, it is hard to imagine how we would have to -- or want to --choose between the two. (p. 54)

Conducting the Study

The ontological or philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and, to some extent, the radical hermeneutics of Caputo and Derrida provide the philosophical framework and the methodological considerations of this study. In particular, Gadamer's notions of the dialogical nature of understanding, preunderstandings, fusion of horizons, and understanding as application provide guidance and direction to the study. The study is also informed by radical hermeneutics, the hermeneutics, that, in Caputo's words, "wants to restore life to its original difficulty." Because learning disability is a socially constructed phenomenon, one which may not necessarily serve the best interests of our children, a more "suspicious" hermeneutic is also needed. A deconstructive critique offers a resistance to a metanarrative such as learning disability by contesting it from within its own assumptions. Radical hermeneutics, with its ironic dialogue with the past and its critical reworking of tradition, provides the critical edge needed in this study.

Apart from being guided by ontological and radical hermeneutics in this study, my challenge was, as I saw it, to orient myself to the research in both a pedagogic and hermeneutic way. What this meant to me was trying to anchor the research within my own horizon of meaning as a teacher and parent while maintaining an openness towards the question and the everyday, practical

meanings of the other participants in the study. For me, as researcher, to become a partner in the research was to admit the hermeneutical nature of being in the world with others. To be open to others, to engage in open dialogue about that which is unclear or confusing to us, for example, "what it is that allows us to see certain children as learning disabled" is to increase the possibility of coming to a more profound understanding of the question. To involve oneself as a researcher and a participant in a conversation is to participate in and share that which we want to understand. It is clear then that a hermeneutic study such as this does not express a purely academic or scientific interest in the meaning of learning disability. Rather it is an exploration of what it means to act meaningfully with children in an educational milieu. Therefore, understanding is not complete unless we are able to see "what is understood" as applying to us in a practical and pedagogical way.

Overview and preliminary research

Focussing on the meaning of learning disability, not as a problem to be solved, but as a question of inquiry, I entered into a series of conversations with teachers of learning disabled students. The conversations were modelled on Gadamer's notion of the dialogical character of interpretation. The research stance was one of providing a space for meaning to emerge during the course of the conversations. Certainly one of the guiding beliefs was that the lived experiences of teachers are a valuable resource for coming to a deeper and richer understanding of the question. Locating the question within the classroom experiences of teachers gave the study its ontological grounding, its connection to the everyday lifeworld of being with and teaching learning disabled students.

In the first phase of the research I made contact with ten teachers from two large urban school districts whose names were given to me by school principals. Although my plan was only to include three or four teachers, I thought it wise to talk to all of these people in order to explain my study and to determine who the interested parties might be. In that regard, I held introductory meetings with the ten teachers as well as two consultants of learning disabled students. To ensure that teacher-participants understood both the intent of my research study and the extent of their contribution to it I wrote a letter of introduction beforehand to all potential participating teachers (see Appendix A, part one). I also included a copy of possible beginning questions we would address in the study (see Appendix A, part two).

After meeting with me to discuss the nature of the research as well as the time commitment involved, six teachers expressed an interest in pursuing the research question. Three were elementary teachers, two were junior high teachers and one was a senior high school teacher. I, too, felt comfortable enough to work with any of the six who had agreed to continue the research; I also felt I could benefit from their participation, in effect, that they would have something significant to offer to the question. To ensure a fair representation across the grade levels, I thought it wise to choose at least one teacher from each level, elementary, junior high, and high school. This necessitated inviting the sole high school teacher and, for reasons of logistics, the elementary teacher and junior high school teacher were chosen from schools located nearest to the university.

Brief descriptions of the three participants are given below. In order to preserve anonymity their names (as well as the names of schools, children or school personnel that came up in the conversations) have been changed.

Lynne Lynne has had over 25 years experience working at the junior and senior high levels. She has a graduate diploma in special education and has been a teacher of learning disabled high school students. At the present time, she is a junior high school administrator who works with special needs students, including learning disabled students.

Karen Karen worked as a teacher of learning disabled students at the junior high school level for four years and as a practicum associate in special education at the university for a year. Previous to that she was a special education teacher for approximately 10 years. Karen has a master's degree in special education and is currently working as a learning assistance teacher at the senior high level.

Vanore Vanore has had approximately nine years of experience as a learning disability teacher at the elementary level. She is in the process of completing her master's degree in special education and is presently working as an LD teacher in a small elementary school.

Research conversations

In June, 1990 I began the more formal part of the research by holding the first of a series of three different conversations with each of the three teachers. Although neither the individual teacher nor I knew one another extremely well, we had, in the short time available to us, established somewhat of a friendly, and certainly cordial relationship with one another. As well as introducing myself as a student of research, I also discussed my personal interest as a mother of a "learning disabled" child and my pedagogical orientations as a teacher and consultant. This disclosure on my part seemed to be welcomed by the participants; they felt they could now see "where I was coming from."

Establishing such trust with a participant is essential if the research conversation is to proceed in a productive and meaningful way.

In the conversations the idea was to concentrate as much as possible on the question of learning disability in order to fully explore its meaning with the teacher-participants. Guided by Gadamer's hermeneutic priority of the question over the answer, I tried to maintain an openness in the conversations towards the object of our discussions: the meaning of learning disability. However, because Gadamer's dialectic of experience is not the natural structure of a conversation, questions that allowed the participants to examine preunderstandings, challenge assertions and/or question assumptions had to be formally introduced. Such a critical orientation was needed to modify and enlarge horizons to encompass new understandings. But because there is really no systematic procedure, no sequence of pre-arranged questions, no plan for arriving at conclusions and no method for determining truth statements, the conversation in a sense had to move forward by itself, animated by the interest generated by the participants.

Because a research conversation has a different intent than an ordinary conversation, it was necessary at times to re-direct the conversation if we digressed, ask for clarification and elaboration if confusion arose, or to provide support if needed. Generally I tried to maintain a minimum degree of control over the conversations so that they did not dissolve into "a mere exchange of opinions" or deviate from the guiding question. This is not to say that a certain amount of latitude was not desired or allowed when exploring the question; it was. However, because there is a difference between openness and digression and between openness and opinion, whenever possible, I tried to ensure that the conversation move in as productive a way as possible.

Thematic analysis

Following each of the conversations, written transcriptions were made. While transcribing the audio conversations I attended to how the conversation spoke to the research question. This was the third phase of the research. In attempting to interpret teachers' situational meanings, themes were employed to help give shape to the notion of understanding the meaning of learning disability. Themes, according to van Manen, are "fasteners, foci, or threads around which the [hermeneutical question] is facilitated" (1990, p. 91). They are meant to draw together the separate threads of the interpretive products of the conversations and to give shape and substance to inchoate notions, nascent ideas and emerging thoughts. Van Manen expresses thematic analysis clearly:

> In human science research the notion of theme may best be understood by examining its methodological and philosophical character. . . . As we are able to articulate the notion of theme we are able to clarify further the nature of human science research. Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure--grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of "seeing" meaning. . . . Themes gives control and order to our research and writing. (1990, p. 79)

The three-faceted procedure to articulating themes that I followed was essentially the same as that of van Manen (1990, pp. 92-93): the highlighting approach, the line by line approach and the holistic approach. In the highlighting approach I looked for phrases or statements that were particularly revealing about learning disability and highlighted those as tentative themes. In the detailed line by line approach, I considered each phrase, sentence or cluster of sentences to discern what it might mean in regard to understanding learning disability. Finally, by attending to each conversational text as a whole, I tried to formulate themes that would capture the meaning of the complete text. The result was an initial list of themes. To show that this was not just an

arbitrary compilation of ideas, I approached the entire text of each conversation with the list of initial themes to search for support. Before I returned the interpreted conversations to the teachers, I included textual support for each of the themes.

Transcriptions of the conversations were given to the participants before we met again for subsequent conversations. A typewritten copy of my interpretations, written in the form of initial themes, was also shared with the teachers. (Samples of the transcriptions and of initial themes are included in appendixes B and C). I encouraged the participants to read this material before our next conversation to make certain the transcriptions were correct (or not misleading) and to see if they believed the interpretations were a fair representation of the conversation. Their reading, reflection and validation of the transcriptions and interpretations constituted the fourth phase of the research.

Participants were also invited to use the transcripts and written interpretations as opportunities for further reflection outside our meeting times. Also contained in the interpretation were questions that surfaced during the conversations. When we met again for the next conversation, I began the conversation by attending to participants' concerns and questions about the previous conversation. If clarifications, modifications or changes were needed, they were attended to at this time. The transcriptions, the interpretations and emergent questions provided an initial focus for subsequent conversations. In this way, new conversations were linked to previous ones.

Interpreting the Learning Disability Text

After each series of three conversations was completed, the research moved into a different stage. The three conversations that were held with individual participants resulted in approximately 200 pages of written transcriptions and approximately 100 themes. The next stage of the research was to combine the three conversations of each participants into "one text" (that is, one text for Karen, one for Vanore and one for Lynne) in order to "test" the initial themes, to look for commonalties and contradictions across and within the series of conversations, and to see if different themes emerged when the three conversations were considered as one rather than three. That is to say, the collected themes of each participant now became the object of reflection. The point was to "dialogue" with each of the three teacher-texts in order to interpret each teacher's situational meaning of learning disability. Because the three conversations resulted in over 100 initial themes, it was necessary to reconsider, re-formulate and reduce these themes by reflecting upon the conversations as a whole. The idea was to come up with the themes that most truthfully represented teachers' situational meanings of learning disability. The themes, accompanied by my interpretation of their meaning as well as salient excerpts, are presented in chapter four.

The final stage of this research was influenced by both Gadamer and the radical hermeneutics of Caputo. Although Gadamer's ontological orientation with its focus on trust and mutuality essential to authentic dialogue offers a concrete and often profound alternative understanding to the dominant scientific explanation of learning disability, nevertheless, that dominant discourse and its implications still live on somewhat unconsciously in our local power structures, our thoughts, our language and our pedagogy. Radical hermeneutics, because it is able to critique from the outside, because it looks to see what the text does

not say, because it uncovers contradictions within the text, because it reveals perspectives the text glosses over or omits, and because it interrogates or de-emphasizes human certainties is exceedingly good at describing "the irregularities and differences by which we are inhabited" (Caputo, 1987, p. 6) without succumbing to nihilism and anarchism. In this regard, the texts of the the conversations are interpreted in chapter four more in the manner of a hermeneutics of trust. In chapter five I attempt to step out of the tradition of the learning disability discourse realm and also adopt the position of a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Chapter Four

Representing Participants' Meanings

Introduction

A hermeneutical study of this nature attempts to seek understandings through the disclosure of teachers' meanings. In this chapter, I draw upon the ontological hermeneutics of Gadamer, especially his notion of the "hermeneutics of trust" as discussed by Michelfelder (1989) to attempt a hermeneutical interpretation of the meaning of learning disability and its relationship to teaching for the participants in this study.

We are reminded that, for Gadamer, hermeneutic interpretation occurs in the fusion of horizons between the interpreter's preunderstandings and the text of the other. In other words, in order to understand why teachers interpret the meaning of learning disability in the ways that they do, part of my task was to listen to, and respond to, what it was teachers were saying about learning disability. In addition to establishing this participatory closeness, Ricoeur (1988) informs us that the hermeneutic interpreter must also maintain a critical distance from the texts in order to personally appropriate the meanings and the possibilities these disclose. The transcription of the oral conversations into written format helped provide the critical distance of which Ricoeur speaks. Thus, interpreting what was inscribed in writing rather than what was said orally allowed me to adopt a more reflective attitude towards the texts which would not have been possible in the immediacy of a conversation.

The nine research conversations that were held with the three teacher participants in this study stretched over a four year period from June, 1990 until July, 1994. The conversations were held in various schools, at the university

and in my home. Not including the preliminary conversation, three conversations, each approximately one and a half hours in length, were held with each teacher. Altogether there were nine conversations, which were contained in approximately thirteen hours of audio tape and which translated into over 200 pages of written transcriptions.

As a hermeneutic partner in conversation, my role was to encourage the participants to reflectively re-visit their pedagogical practice and also to help them express what it was they wanted to say about learning disability. In order to more fully understand the meaning of learning disability, I had to allow myself to be challenged by the participants' ideas and particular teaching experiences both within the context of the conversations and afterwards in reflection with the texts.

This particular chapter attempts to reveal the three teachers' situational understandings of the meaning of learning disability. It expresses those understandings in the form of themes as described in van Manen (1990). Altogether the nine research conversations yielded 106 initial themes. Once these initial themes had been read and approved by the participants, and each series of three conversations was completed, the collected themes of each participant became the object of reflection. The idea was to allow themes to emerge which seemed to most truthfully represent teachers' understandings of learning disability (see the section entitled *Thematic analysis* in Chapter Three for a more complete explanation). This particular stage of research yielded fourteen core themes in total (four for Lynne, five each for Karen and Vanore). These core themes will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

I took special care with the text of the conversations, ensuring that textual support was available for the themes that were drawn out of the texts. The detailed and comprehensive textual support also helped to give credence and

veracity to the themes. If I could not find explicit or implicit support, I assumed that what was being revealed, in part, were my prejudices and preunderstandings rather than teachers' situational meanings. In this way, I came to recognize at least some of my prejudices that were preventing me from truly opening myself to the other.

In this chapter I attempt to move the participants' voices to the centre of the interpretation of learning disability in order to more fully understand what it is that is being expressed in the hermeneutic conversations. My voice, I hope, moves off stage to listen, to give assistance, and to support. In trying to reveal teachers' meanings of learning disability, my objective is not to praise or condemn their ideas or actions, nor is it to attempt to explain these in an objective fashion. The hermeneutic task in this chapter, as I understand it, is to help the participants express what it was they wanted to say about learning disability. Therefore, I try to use the participant's own words, as much as possible, when explicating the themes. What follows are the themes representing the understandings of the three participants. These are preceded, first, by background information about each of the participants.

Lynne

When I first met Lynne in June, 1990, she was a teacher of learning disabled students at a large urban high school. Previous to that she had spent "twenty-two years in junior high schools, seven of those years working with pre-vocational students." It was during those years that she developed an interest in "non-coping adolescents." When she returned to university with a sabbatical to take a diploma in special education, she began to be able to "sort out who was who," that is, how to differentiate between low achievers such as

"adaptation" and "learning disabled" students. It was then that Lynne "started to perceive the learning disabled student in class." She indicated that the readings at the university helped her to diagnose "John's problem," for instance, and to "explain Jared's behaviour" (1, p. 1)[1].

Shortly after she completed her diploma, Lynne set up a learning assistance program at her school for "non-coping" junior high students "which covered the learning disabled students, the slow learners, the behaviour problems"(1, p.1). After working with this modified resource room concept for a few years, Lynne was given the opportunity to set up a learning disability program at Harold McArthur High School. She had been in that position for less than one year when she became involved in my research project.

At Harold McArthur School, Lynne provided learning assistance in regularly scheduled classes with the 15 LD students for whom she was responsible. They received high school credits in her class just as they did in other academic subjects. She also met frequently with the academic teachers of the LD students to discuss students' strengths and weaknesses, instructional strategies, assessment and so forth. As with all the LD special classes in the school board system at that time, there was a full-time teacher aide assigned to Lynne's program.

In order to be considered as a candidate for the high school LD program, each of the students had to first undergo a considerable amount of testing. One of the main criteria was a discrepancy between IQ and academic performance. In other words, the students' IQs would have to be above average while their marks should be significantly below grade level. Lynne informed me later,

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[1] The numeral 1 refers to the first conversation, 2 to the second conversation and 3 to the third. I follow the same pattern in the remainder of chapter four with Karen's and Vanore's understandings.

however, that the IQ stipulation was lowered for a few students, especially those with "vocal" parents.

When I first introduced myself to Lynne over the phone she told me there was a good possibility of her acquiring an administrative position in the school board for the following September. If this turned out to be the case she said she would not participate in the research. However, she agreed to meet with me to discuss the study. I then sent her a more formal letter of explanation, accompanied by a series of possible beginning questions (see appendix A, parts one and two). By the time of our first meeting, she had learned of her new position as an assistant principal at a large junior high school. After we talked for awhile, she changed her mind about not participating in the study saying, "I should be able to give you at least one hour a month." Because I did not want to exert pressure upon her, I told her to sleep on it for a few days and let me know. "No," she said firmly, "I'll do it. It sounds interesting."

One thing that impressed me right away about Lynne was that she told her students about her new appointment before she informed others in the school; she did not want them to hear the news from anyone else. At the end of our informal conversation we arranged to meet in a week's time to begin the more formal conversations. I left feeling relieved and pleased. Lynne and I seemed to get along quite well and I sincerely believed she would be able to contribute a great deal to my inquiry into the meaning of learning disability.

Our first conversation, on June 26, 1990, focussed primarily on Lynne's recent experiences as a LD teacher at Harold McArthur High School. Almost everything we discussed was in reference to the LD students in her charge, as evidenced by the following remarks about a student named Andrew:

> [Andrew] is basically a non-reader. When I brought him into the program . . . I sat him down and started talking a bit about what learning disabled

> people are like and some of the problems they have. It was like a light bulb went on for him. I asked him , *"Andrew, how do you manage in school when you can't read?"* And he said, *"Well, I have ways,"* and he started to explain all these avoidance strategies he uses to cope. (1, p. 2)

The second conversation took place about 15 months later in my home on October 14, 1992. By this time Lynne was in her second year as assistant principal at Northwood Junior High. One of her responsibilities was coordinating the LD program at the school. Lynne took an energetic interest in the two LD resource rooms and knew the students and the teachers very well. Her's was more than an administrative interest; although she was not presently teaching, at heart she felt herself to be a special education teacher. Concern for special needs students, LD in particular, was evident throughout this and the subsequent conversation.

Instructional programming for LD students and other special needs students consumed a good deal of our discussion in the second conversation. At this point, some six years after the school board had initially set up learning disability classes, there had been some changes in the program. Most notable of these were the following two modifications:

1. fewer schools hiring aides for the LD teachers
2. LD teachers working more with regular classroom teachers than in previous years, helping classroom teachers adapt and modify instruction and evaluation to suit LD students

Lynne believed these changes were positive ones:

> We have done so much in teacher education in the last few years and it takes people a while to adjust to change and to all this new information. . . . When teachers were faced with the integration model they had to work with these [LD] children on a regular basis. They found that some of the strategies that were provided for them by the LD teacher were working for the LD kids very well so the teachers started using those strategies with

> other students. It has helped accommodate student differences across the board. (2, p. 2)

The third and last conversation took place at my high school some 20 months later on July 8, 1994. Lynne had just been promoted to the position of principal in a small junior high school and one of her concerns was the resource room at the school. As in the second conversation, the central focus was upon instructional strategies for LD students. Lynne was also very concerned about what she saw as a "backwards" movement beginning to develop in education.

> The government is talking about implementing . . . grade level tests at every grade. . . and grade nine departmentals for the four core subjects. I get very upset when people say that our problems in education are because we have a child-centred approach. What other approach can you have? . . . I worry that we will be forced to take a very hard line approach and I think that the LD kids will suffer. (3, p. 6)

Over the course of the three conversations, each of approximately 90 minutes in length, we addressed numerous issues dealing with the notion of learning disability. The thematic analysis of the three conversations in total yielded 38 initial themes, none to which Lynne objected and only one which she chose to qualify. In later reflection when I considered the three conversations as one entire text, four core themes emerged which seemed central to Lynne's understanding of learning disability. The core themes are as follows:

1. learning disability continues to be a puzzle
2. LD students must learn strategies to alleviate their disability
3. teachers must learn how to differentiate instruction and assessment in order to accommodate learning disabled students

4. the concept of learning disability has given us the opportunity to improve learning experiences for all children

Theme one: Learning disability continues to be a puzzle

After many years of working with special needs classes, LD students still remained somewhat of a mystery to Lynne. She was quite certain, however, that they were different from "slow learners," "pre-vocational" or "adaptation" students.

> The difference between a slow learner and a learning disabled student is the LD student's unique ability to understand things. They seem to have such a good grasp of concepts and it's only in the performance like trying to reproduce or trying to express their ideas verbally [that they have difficulty]. The ideas and concepts are there. . . . It's just they can't perform the task that's required. (1, pp. 3-4)

Lynne admitted, however, that to the undiscriminating eye learning disabled students may often "appear to be slow learners" and often "look like IOP students" (1, p. 3). Ultimately, she said, it is the consultants who, in consultation with schools and parents, "apply the school board's criteria"(1, p. 1) in order to determine whether a child is learning disabled.

The low-achieving students who were not IOP, pre-vocational, adaptation or slow learners were "real puzzles," puzzles that she could not "unlock" (2, pp. 7-8). If only, Lynne added in the subsequent conversation , "I could figure out how to correct [the puzzle]" (3, p. 12). When I asked her to elaborate, she replied:

> Something is not connecting [with LD students] or is different than we would do because often when you try to use the same method we would use -- and it is difficult to do because we are not quite sure how we process information. When you try to get them to do it, you say, *"Look at this b, just look at this b"* and . . . they are looking and I know something different is happening. That's what I mean by processing, whatever happens in the brain and the transference back out. (3, p. 12)

Lynne acknowledged, however, that we know very little about how any person actually learns. "We are not quite sure how . . . a large majority of people. . . process information. . . . It just goes in somewhere and our brain does something with it and we make sense out of it" (3, p. 11). When, out of pedagogical concern and intellectual curiosity, she asked herself and others what it is they do when they "process information," the response was singularly unhelpful : *"I don't know. It just happens"* (3, p. 13). However, one of the exciting challenges in the LD program, as Lynne saw it, was "learning to identify the problem because it is so hidden, to zero in on what exactly the problem is and try to come up with a workable solution" (1, p. 14).

Although Lynne believed arriving at a technical solution was, on one hand, a desirable end, such a solution has its own kind of limitations too as she had found over the years:

> You try something with a student because it happened to work with two or three other students [and then you discover] it doesn't work. . . . How they [each] process is so different. . . . [At first] I did not have a good understanding of the huge variety. [LD students] go from being super organized to being totally disorganized. They go from being extremely dependent to being very independent. Good to excellent social skills to very poor social skills. The parameters are so, so wide. (3, p. 4; 2, p. 9; 1, p.16)

Lynne suggested that teachers found the profound differences among learning disabled students particularly difficult. "As educators," she said, we tend "to lump these [LD students] together and yet when you look at them closely they are so different" (1, p. 16). Regardless of their differences, though, they are all "bright," Lynne would argue: "I've had students with IQ scores of 135, 136, 140 [but] we can't seem to get [them] to demonstrate that. . . . [They] have a good grasp of concepts but they can't perform the task that's required"

(1, p. 17; 2, p. 9). When I asked her how she could tell the ideas and concepts were understood if students were unable to "express their ideas verbally," she said, "just by talking to them and asking certain questions [you] could see their unique ability to understand things" (1, p. 3). To explain exactly what she meant, Lynne provided an example:

> One of my students was having a great deal of difficulty because he's . . . required to do in-class essays. . . . He is able to sit down with me and say, *"I know this is how an essay goes together. I need an introduction and I need to use transition words,"* etc. There's a good understanding of that. He has all the vocabulary and yet when he tries to set that down on paper it gets all garbled. . . . He's missing articles; he's missing endings off words and off sentences. It comes out in broken English and sentence fragments. It's like his brain is going too fast for his pencil. . . . Yet he understands what should be there. (1, p. 4)

Some of these LD students, she concluded, "can be fixed in two years, some in a couple of months. . . but for some it's going to be a lifetime problem" (3, p. 4). Still, Lynne hoped, "as we get more knowledge . . . we should be able to get better at giving tests to assess how people process information. [Somewhere there] has to be a key to help [LD children] become successful" (2, p. 7; 3, p. 15). Somewhere there has to be a way to solve the puzzle of learning disability.

Theme two: Learning disabled students must learn strategies to alleviate their disabilities

Although solving the '"puzzle" of learning disability was always in Lynne's mind, her primary concern was to help learning disabled students become successful in school. The best way to do this, she believed, was to equip the LD students with a set of strategies. This is how Lynne talked about strategies:

> I think students need to have some strategy training and to have some understanding of self. . . . It is important for these children to become advocates for themselves, so they know their strengths and weaknesses. . . and what they must do to compensate. . . . What we need to do as teachers is to say: *"Here are nine different ways to do something; this is the one way I do it. Experiment with these and find which is the best way for you"*. (3, pp. 3 & 14; 1, p. 6)

Over the years Lynne came to believe that instruction for learning disabled students must not just focus on student "weaknesses" in a segregated resource room setting. Instead, as she stated, her "philosophy [is to] take these children, give them some strategies, put them in the regular classroom and give them the opportunity to practise those strategies" (3, pp. 2-3).

Lynne observed that it was easier for special education teachers to understand the importance of strategy training than it was for regular subject area teachers:

> Special education training at the university is more strategy focussed than subject centred. [Teachers] are equipped with techniques that are neglected in other areas at the university. For example, behaviour management -- that pays off whether you are in a regular or special education class. Just having the knowledge of all the different categories and different learning styles and all those things. We look for people with a special education background to teach in the schools. (1. p. 2)

Central to the "philosophy of strategy training," Lynne explained, was what she called "understanding of self." The students have to "want to fix" [their problems]. . . to gain some control. . . , [and] take charge of their behaviour (1, p. 7). With the help of a teacher, they "need to analyze what their strengths and weaknesses are [and] some possible ways to get around them" (2, p. 6; 1, p. 11). She added that teachers, in turn, must make sure that the LD students are using their strategies correctly and effectively.

Unfortunately though, as Lynne found out with teaching learning disabled students, strategies are, in and of themselves, not the total answer.

"The hardest thing to do with some of these LD students, [Lynne explained] is to get them to give up on something that is not working. They really grab on to ineffective strategies and there is a lot of resistance in getting them to move in another direction" (1, p. 5). Conversely, Lynne added, LD students often employ effective strategies of their own, ones that teachers do not understand. She shared three anecdotes:

> 1. I had a boy with orientation difficulties in the program this year who even though he had a map of this school. . . could not find his locker. [Although] I did all sorts of things to help him [and he finally learned where his locker was], in talking to him, I don't have a good understanding of his strategy. I don't know how he mastered it. (1, p. 15)
>
> 2. I have this one student who wrote a paragraph and I typed it exactly the way he had written it. [When he read my copy], he could pick up his errors. He writes very legibly and this was a piece of work that he had already edited several times himself. . . . Why it worked I don't know. (1, p. 5)
>
> 3. [LD students] are kind of amazing. Every once in a while they will make these huge gains for no apparent reason. There was this boy in grade nine who was in the LD program [but] received no resource room help, was very bright, was totally integrated, . . . there was no strategy training yet he showed remarkable improvement. (3, p. 15)

Even though she considered these imponderables, Lynne maintained that "the strategies students learn will make them much more independent," much more likely to succeed, much more able to express "all of that innate ability" (1, pp. 10 & 17) that learning disabled students possess.

Theme three: Teachers must learn how to differentiate instruction and assessment in order to accommodate learning disabled students

Over the course of the three conversations Lynne kept returning to the issue of accommodating student differences in schools. She expressed a

mixture of optimism and discouragement regarding accommodation.

Optimistically, she indicated that

> I've been very encouraged about the way education has been going in the last five years . . . because some good things have been happening. . . . If we go on the same way we have been [with] the focus being child-centred then we will see real changes in the classroom. Looking at things differently, looking at allowing kids to express themselves differently. That's what I hope for. (3, p.16)

But she was also concerned that

> As we get older change is very hard. Right now we are faced with an aging teacher population and teacher education is difficult. . . . Kids learning differently, at different rates, starting at different places. . . . That's what we should be doing with kids. It's just how do we convince everyone. (3, pp. 16 & 8)

Lynne noted the effects of the new policy of integration of special needs students, suggesting that "[an] integration model [means that] teachers have to work with LD children on a regular basis" (2, p. 2) whereas in previous years special education teachers did most, if not all, of the teaching. The special education teacher, although still working with special needs students to a certain extent, would now act as a resource teacher to help classroom teachers accommodate students with learning differences. Lynne found that the change to "integrated settings" was often met with "resistance" by classroom teachers. Most of the resistance she attributed to fear. "The teacher fears she won't know what to do [or] thinks she is not doing the right thing and [therefore] the child won't be successful and the teacher will think she is a failure" (2, p. 4). However, Lynne believed teachers should not be fearful; instead, they should feel comforted because "special education teachers are safety nets. They are there to rescue the [classroom] teacher. . . . [They] will not necessarily fully

integrate all children. . . , only when it is suitable, sometimes just for a particular unit [of study]" (2, p. 4).

Lynne felt that one of the ways teachers deal with their "insecurity" and "feelings of inadequacy," is to "send [the LD students] to someone else -- the specialist or the resource teacher down the hall, [believing] these people will know how to deal with the students. [They think] these children have learning problems that are beyond [their] scope" (3, p. 8). Teachers may also get "defensive and angry" as well. When I asked who or what they were angry at Lynne responded, "The integration model. [They say], *"Who thought of this? Why are we doing this? This is my classroom. I have other responsibilities. I have to get through the curriculum and this is the way I do it"* (3, p. 9).

Lynne has found that technical aides for LD students such as "hand-held spell-checkers," "lap-top computers" and "voice activated computers" are often regarded with suspicion by many teachers. They believe these aides give the LD student an unfair advantage. But Lynne has argued they should be accepted. In addition, she feels that learning disabled students should be able to have other forms of assistance such as having their exams read to them (3, p. 2), their writing transcribed for them (1, p. 4) and allowances made for them on diploma exams (3, p. 7). In short, whatever it takes to ensure that students' "products" are an accurate representation of their abilities. Such accommodation should not be considered "radical"; Lynne insisted, it should become "commonplace" (3, p. 4). "Our society is changing," Lynne remarked:

> Education is really important now. [We have to make LD students] positive, functioning, contributing members of our society. . . . My home town was full of people who . . . sat in the back of the classroom [and eventually] left school after grade eight. They are successful individuals today, by and large, most of them. It used to be an expected kind of thing that these people would not do well in school. We thought it was okay because they could always do something else. Now it's not okay to not do well in school. (3, pp. 13-14)

The demands of our highly organized, literate society have made Lynne think it is "important for children to become advocates for themselves [so they can determine what] they are good at and what they need to compensate for" (3, p. 14). But it takes "a lot of coaching, a lot of discussion" [on the part of teachers] to help students "express their knowledge in different ways," (3, p. 10) she said. Because "these kids have processing difficulties, [teachers] have to quit thinking about content and instead think of ways of getting them to demonstrate their learning (2, p. 7). Sometimes we just get too "caught up in sameness," Lynne offered, "but we cannot afford to make everyone the same and the content the same" (3, p. 7). That just amounts to a "sink or swim situation" (2, p. 3). We have to think of alternatives. Otherwise, all we will be able to say about students is, "This is bright, this is medium, this is dumb" (2, p. 3). We can do better than that, Lynne insisted. "I know it's not easy to implement ideas in a class of 30" (2, p. 12) but if "we create a climate for teachers to take risks and to change, [they will be able] to move outside their comfort zones" (3, pp. 17 & 8). As a result, we should be able to "accommodate student differences across the board" (2, p. 2) and "communicate [this philosophy] to the general public, to the parent" (2, p. 2).

Theme four: The concept of learning disability has given us the opportunity to improve learning experiences for all children

Early in the conversations Lynne informed me that teaching learning disabled children had given her new insights into teaching practices in general. Working with the 15 students at Harold McArthur High School for a year "had been a real eye-opener" (1, p. 13) for her. When she was helping the learning disabled students with their academic course work, she discovered many of the difficulties these students experienced could have been avoided with better overall "teaching techniques" (1, p. 14). For example, she suggested that all

teachers "should write instructions, dates, reminders on the board" instead of just giving "oral directions" (1, pp. 13-14). Such a simple technique would help all students who were not "auditory learners," not just the learning disabled ones. Lynne found that because she was the teacher of learning disabled students, the other teachers were willing to consider "[making] compensations of some sort" (1, p. 19) for *any* students "who associated with [her]." She shared two particular experiences:

> 1. I was helping one of my learning disabled students with Math 23 [when] he ran into a couple of girls who were [also] having difficulty. He told them, *"You know, you should get Mrs. Carter to help you because she knows what to do."* When they approached me, I said, *"Sure,"* [and] I worked with them during one of their spares. Before I knew it, the teacher was asking, *"Well, you know, Neil gets extra time. Should I give extra time to these two girls too?"* "*Of course, you should,"* I said. (1, p.19)
>
> 2. The biology teacher used to take marks off for spelling, which I did not understand. Who cares if it is spelled correctly? . . . This was going to finish the learning disabled students. They can't spell simple words, let alone hermaphroditic. One of the biology teachers came to me and said, *"These students are going to get 20% instead of 70%."* He felt badly because the kids obviously knew their work. So I said, *"Maybe you could just drop this rule."* And so basically because of that they changed the spelling rule for all students [and] now take off a maximum of 5 %, I think. (1, p. 20)

As a result of these experiences at the high school, Lynne felt if she taught regular "classes again a lot of things would be done differently" (1, p. 13). Consequently, when she was about to begin her new administrative position at the junior high school, she was quite optimistic about "accommodating student differences." Because of her considerable experience with special needs students in general, she strongly "believed that all students, [not just LD students] should be able to use [aides such as] Franklin spell checkers," receive "extra time for exams," (1, pp.18-19) and other special considerations.

Lynne said she sees "the LD program as leading the way" [in accommodating student differences]; it forces people to look at children differently" (2, p. 5). Once teachers are told "these children have above average intelligence, they must look at them differently. They can't look at them as the dumb kids" (2, p. 7). Furthermore, the practice of integrating LD students into the regular classrooms has brought academic benefits to many other students. Once classroom teachers "found that some of the strategies provided for them by the LD teacher were working so well for the LD students they started using those strategies with other students" (2, p. 2). Although Lynne admitted it takes "teachers a while to absorb all these changes," [integration of LD students has helped teachers] adapt curriculum for all students" (2, p. 2). It's helped them think of some "other ways to get students to demonstrate their learning" (2, p. 9).

What Lynne has also noticed over the last few years is that people are "now expanding the categories of special needs students." She explained what she means:

> We used to have: *"These are LD children, these are adaptation, these are regular."* Now we are looking at it in a much broader sense. Teachers are now saying, *"I know so and so is not classified as LD, but he does this and this and really has some of the characteristics, so how can I work with that sort of person?"* They are seeing that everyone crosses over and they don't all fit the narrow definition of the school board. . . . [There are] students who have similar trouble [as LD students] but who are without labels. (2, pp. 1 & 6)

Basically, Lynne believes that expanding the category of the special needs student is a positive development, enabling a better understanding of the variations in children -- helping to, in her words, "accommodate student differences across the board" (2, p. 2). Lynne cautioned, however, that "any school contemplating an integrated program should have a learning disabled

class first" (2, p. 7). She also warned against completely eliminating special needs categories such as learning disability:

> I think the labels should eventually fall away but we have to be careful we don't get rid of them too quickly. Teachers need something concrete to hang their hat on -- to categorize the student. These labels are a lot more teacher friendly than 'bright, medium and dumb'. Labels [such as learning disability] give teachers a framework. . . . There is also the danger when you are pro-special education [to allow many unfunded children] into the LD program. Would they benefit? Of course, they would. But you can't just open the door. The program would soon become watered down. (2, pp. 3 & 10)

Lynne would argue that keeping the classification of learning disability is also important for families. She explained that many parents are more willing to say, "*My child is learning disabled",* rather than saying, *"my child has difficulty in* school" (1, p. 18). There is no doubt, she thinks, that some parents "fought very hard to get their children identified [as LD]" (1, p. 18) -- in part, because of the academic benefits it brings. Furthermore, parents can "challenge the school board placement and if they can prove the school board does not provide an adequate place for the child, they can take the child elsewhere . . . and have the child fully funded" (2, p. 11).

Lynne said she realizes It has taken teachers quite a few years to absorb and adjust to a special needs category such as learning disability, for example, "What does a learning disabled child look like? What characteristics do they have?" (2, p. 2). Lynne would argue that, although all children "need assistance to help them learn better. . . you can't just lump [students] all in together" (2, pp.6 & 5). The school system still works on certain requirements, she states, and in the end there is still "a world of difference between a learning disabled child and an adaptation student" (3, p. 3).

Karen

I heard about Karen through Lynne before I actually met her. Karen was known as an excellent teacher and Lynne wondered if I would be working with her in my study. Karen had won a *Teacher of the Year Award* given by the local association for Children with Learning Disabilities, followed by the *Province of Alberta's Excellence in Teaching Award* a few years later. When I first met her, Karen was a teacher of learning disability at Southridge Junior High School. I had spoken to her principal on the phone before contacting Karen. He assured me that she would undoubtedly agree to be a participant in my research. The principal himself was quite helpful and encouraging, which I found surprising at the time because none of the other administrators had shown any interest in my research. I later discovered that he had just finished his doctoral dissertation the year before. His support and Karen's enthusiasm made me feel welcome.

Karen was completing her twelfth year as a special education teacher when I met her in June, 1990. This was her second year teaching the learning disability class at Southridge. Before that she had been teaching special education at another junior high school in the city. Karen majored in special education at university and upon graduation, had immediately taken up a position as a special education teacher at an elementary school. After teaching in that capacity for five years, Karen returned to university to complete her Masters in special education.

When I first met Karen it was the third year of the LD program at Southridge. The LD teacher who preceded Karen was now a principal in the system.

Karen's instructional program was different from Lynne's. While Lynne worked as a learning assistance teacher to students (and to other teachers to

some extent) Karen taught the core subjects at the seventh and eighth grade levels for a class of 12-15 learning disabled students. For the remainder of her teaching time she worked with teachers on "program support," helping them integrate learning disabled students at all three grade levels. There was not an official LD class at the grade nine level at Southridge, only a support program where the grade eight "graduates" received some remedial help approximately three times a week.

Our first informal meeting lasted over an hour and during that time Karen kept me engrossed, telling me of her experiences with learning disability at the school, school board and university levels. She informed me that her university education had not "prepared [her] for what [she] was given when [she] went into the system." She did not realize special education "would involve such a diverse population." All she was given in four years at university was "a chapter per population in one special education class." Unfortunately, all of [her] student teaching was done in regular classes" (1, p. 1). Consequently, she felt "inadequate" [and] overwhelmed by the needs of the students." Because she very committed to her students, she soon "started taking university classes again . . . to learn more about [the special education] population" (1, p. 2).

Karen impressed me immediately as an honest, hard-working, outspoken person who was a passionate advocate for her LD students. After our first meeting I wrote in my journal that Karen "thinks school, and life in general, is very difficult for LD children and the LD program is their only hope although, [she admitted] it is hard to heal all of their wounds." She told me LD was her life and always had been. Therefore, she was eager to help with my research study and was willing to adapt her schedule to fit in the hour long conversations. I left regretting I had not brought my tape recorder with me so that I could have captured more of our "unofficial" conversation but heartened

by the fact that Karen had agreed to become involved in my study. We agreed to meet three weeks later and I left her with a detailed letter of explanation about my study, accompanied by a series of possible beginning questions for our first formal conversation (see appendix A, parts one and two).

The conversation on June 27, 1990 lasted approximately an hour and a half. We discussed a wide variety of topics ranging from the terminology used in the field of learning disability to the practical difficulties involved in integrating learning disabled students into regular academic classes. A central concern of Karen's throughout the conversation was the failure of classroom teachers to take responsibility for special needs students. Her disappointment with teachers is evident in the following remarks:

> I guess as an educator what bothers me is when I walk down the corridors of any school that I happen to be at is that I feel I am a part of it. Therefore, all of the students housed in the school are part of my responsibility. That means assisting in programs for students or any aspect of the educational plan we have devised in this school. Just because I teach a select group doesn't mean I should be omitted from involving myself with the other kids. Yet when I try to integrate learning disabled students back into the classroom I feel. . . that most teachers do not accept responsibility for them. (1, p. 3)

The second conversation took place over two years later on October 22, 1992 in a classroom at the university. Karen had left her junior high teaching position and was now working as a practicum associate in special education at the university for two years. Her junior high teaching experiences were fresh in her mind and a good part of the conversation was devoted to the difficulties one experiences when teaching within the bureaucracy of a large school board. Karen expressed her frustration in the following way:

> I'm never asked for my opinion. I know what will ensure the child's academic success but I am ignored. . . . Our system is just too big. It is remote; it is removed. It is not taking into consideration the relevant

needs of the child. The system's needs are met in numbers before the needs of the child. (2, pp. 5-6)

We met in Karen's small office at the university seven months later on June 10, 1993, for our third and last conversation. By this time Karen had just finished her first year as a practicum associate and was very enthusiastic about collaboration between the university and the school on the matter of teacher education. She was also quite supportive of the "integrative model" that was currently being promoted by the school board and the university. Over the years Karen had become even more insistent that special education students were every teacher's responsibility and now, as a university instructor, she had the opportunity to influence prospective teachers. This is how Karen explained it:

> I want more than anything to have the general elementary teachers realize that they are responsible for all the children in their classes. They need to know they are responsible for IEPs (individual educational plans). They will be responsible to parents when parents ask how their children can learn more effectively. One of the major reasons teachers do not want to teach or be responsible for special education kids is because they don't have the training. That's why changes have to come at the university first so teachers know . . . it is not just special education experts who are responsible for special education students. (3, p. 2)

The three conversations in total lasted about four and one half hours and yielded twenty-six initial themes. Karen carefully considered each set of themes before she informed me that she was satisfied with my interpretation and the accompanying support. When I considered the three conversations as an entire text, five overall themes emerged which appeared to reflect the understanding Karen had of learning disability:

1. the language of learning disability is a necessary evil

2. all children, regardless of their special needs, are the responsibility of the classroom teacher

3. the school board bureaucracy is not conducive to good pedagogy

4. academic progress of LD students is achieved at great cost to the students and their parents

5. the meaning of learning varies depending upon the time, the place, and the person

Theme one : The language of learning disability is a necessary evil

Early in the first conversation, Karen mentioned that regular classroom teachers were often intimidated by the "diagnostic testing and all the lingo that goes along with it" (1, p. 6). I thought this an issue worth pursuing and asked her to talk "more about the language of the expert, the diagnostician." Her initial response was, "It's damaging." I asked her to elaborate if she could -- for example, "Did technical/medical terminology such as *attentional deficit disorder* provide any sort of help to the LD teachers and students?" Her answer was a resounding, "No." She then elaborated upon and qualified her answer somewhat:

> No, it does not. It should be basic student behaviour and not the label. The label does not tell you what the child is capable of doing. All it does is intimidate people. I give an in-service to my parents so that they're not going to think that their child has "a brain tumor." [I explain] that those terms are a way for specialists to talk among themselves more than anything else. They're for communication; that's their purpose. (1, p. 7)

The language associated with learning disability was a topic we kept returning to throughout all three conversations. It became clear as we

conversed that Karen saw the technical language as "something she could not do without" yet "something she hated to live with."

In terms of the need, Karen thought that technical language was essential for communication. Without the language associated with "diagnostic work, communication with others in the field breaks down." Teachers, she insisted, "need to find out more about these labels . . . rather than complaining they don't know anything" and we must "give them this information so that [the language] is not intimidating." In fact, "the language will have to become universal, [Karen said,] because we are going to see fewer and fewer self-contained special education classrooms" in the future. She added, "If there is to be any communication, there must be a common language" and this language must be "shared amongst school staffs, refined together" or specialists will be unable to "work collaboratively with a staff" (3, pp. 6 & 7).

Karen also claimed that "terminology is critical to designing a program for children." She sees the "[technical] wording as the essence of the program for a LD child." That is why, she argued, that "people need to know that language" and why we need to establish "a common goal for using the language" (3, p. 8).

Another reason why Karen supports LD terminology is because it "helps the LD children to come to terms with their problems, to know what they can and cannot do" (3, p. 15). This is why she "gives the kids a list of all the terms so they can see what they are for," so that they will realize these words are "not horns on their heads" (1, p. 8). She believes at times it is a good idea to let a child "use a label" to justify his or her learning difficulties. After all, Karen reflected, "they didn't choose to have these problems; they've been through enough already" (1, p. 26).

Pragmatically too, Karen has realized the need for labels. Without a label, she admitted, "there is no funding" (1, p. 8). I asked her, "Does this mean

dyscalculia brings money but *having serious problems with mathematics* does not?" "Exactly," Karen responded, "and I am realistic enough to know that's the way they understand it in bureaucracy" (3, p. 10).

Even though Karen was able to provide many reasons why a technical vocabulary was necessary, she still expressed feelings of uneasiness about the use of LD terminology. What seemed to bother her most was how a label tended to limit a teacher's perception of a child.

> The minute you give a child a label then that's how the teachers see the child. . . . [Classroom teachers think] the label alleviates their responsibility. I just don't buy that. [Suddenly] a child is learning disabled and not just a kid anymore. . . . I've seen many fragile people destroyed because of the labels put upon them [and] I think the damage is lifelong. The bottom line is nobody wants to be different and we make these kids different. (1, p. 8; 3, pp. 4 & 13)

Karen went on to say that she "hated the term LD" (3, p. 9) and that she wished "we could just look upon them as children" (3, p. 12). She felt people should talk about "what they can do first, not what they can't do; [they should talk] in terms of a description, not a catch-all phrase such as LD" (3, p. 9).

"Yet," Karen continued, "eliminating the terminology would be going totally backwards. I see value in what these labels can accomplish, what they have done for the LD association" (3, pp. 8 & 12). Karen said she could almost predict what little would have been done for these children had they not been labelled. She concluded, "It's a catch 22. It's a trade-off and I don't have the answers" (3, p. 14).

Theme two: All children, regardless of their special needs, are the responsibility of the classroom teacher

Karen was always very certain that regular classroom teachers had to take responsibility for the education of special education students. This was a central issue for her and she kept returning to it throughout the conversations. The notion of teacher responsibility was especially clear to Karen in the case of learning disabled students, who are in a self-contained classroom for only a portion of their school career. In Karen's situation at the junior high school, specially funded learning disabled students took the core subjects with her for grades seven and eight. They were fully integrated in the other subject areas. When Karen felt students were ready (or in grade nine when funding was no longer available) they were integrated in the core subjects as well. Karen's views on teacher responsibility and her profound disappointment with their lack of involvement are especially clear in the following remarks:

> If the child can handle the curriculum with very few changes or considerations on the part of the regular classroom teacher, then it's fine. However, if there are any special considerations or strategies then there is a problem. . . . I believe it's from the idea that: *"This child has been labelled, this child is LD, this child has funding, this child belongs in that program, not in my room."* Their attitude is: *"This is the curriculum and this is what you will learn."* There is nothing else, no grey area, it's either black or white. . . . My response is, *"Well, excuse me, I'm just trying to give them a chance. Don't they have that right?"* I think most kids can learn the curriculum with certain considerations. (1, pp. 4-5 & 25)

When I told Karen that, in my experience, most classroom teachers objected to integration of special needs students because they did "not have the expertise or specialized training," she vehemently disagreed with their reasons:

> I find that's really a cop-out, You don't need any extra training to be a special education teacher; you just need awareness of individual needs. What upsets me is that these teachers think that special education teachers have the answers, the magic or something. But there is no

> magic and there is nothing special we are doing. . . . Teachers think they are responsible for the curriculum and not the children. That is wrong. . . . If you are going to teach, spend some time figuring out what you need to know and how you can teach these children. I just don't buy it when people say they don't know how to work with these kids. Stop whining and complaining and find out. (1, p. 4; 3, pp. 3-4)

I asked Karen if that meant that she was "arguing for no special education specialization at university" (3, p. 4). Her answer was

> By no means. I am arguing the point that regular classroom teachers cannot shirk the responsibility for programming for the child who has different learning needs than another. No, special education matters. We worked hard for the LD program. . . and speaking from my situation, the LD class made a difference. I realize we have neither the tools or resources for a one to one relationship in a large classroom . . . but when I put these kids back into regular classrooms. . . teachers need to find the resources and space. (3, pp. 4-5)

Karen later qualified her remarks by stating that integration is dependent upon determining "what is the most enabling environment for a child. What they are now doing with mainstreaming, [she added] is just as bad as when they used to segregate all special education students" (3, p. 5). Part of the problem of "teacher irresponsibility," Karen went on to explain, begins at the university.

> Regular student teachers are not anticipating special education students, but just *grade four*. They are out of touch here. . . . All of these people should be teachers of special education, not just the special education teachers. . . . The special education students are [generally] a stronger group than the elementary group. [One reason is] because of their management training that they get in ed. psych. Ed psych. gives teachers courses in behaviour modification, really basic teaching skills [while] elementary ed. is a hit and miss. In special ed. there seems to be more of a consensus about what they should learn whereas in elementary education there are just so many different instructors and they teach it so differently. . . . That's why changes have to come here first at the university so teachers can learn to recognize their responsibilities. (3, pp.1-2)

Even though Karen was supportive of integration of special needs students into the regular classroom, she said she did not "support the philosophy behind many of the mainstream moves in education" (3, p. 10). She suggested that mainstreaming practice tends to develop educational programs according to "economics" more than it does according to "student needs." When I asked her what she thought the future held for learning disability with the current swing towards mainstreaming, she responded this way:

> I believe [there will be] a move away from the special education specialist per se. It has to go. . . . There is now a real push towards understanding instructional strategies, being able to accommodate those who learn differently. Teachers will soon be in a position where they have to embrace that. They will have to. (3, pp. 10 &.18)

Theme three: Academic progress of LD students is achieved at a great cost to the students and their parents

By the time we completed our research conversations Karen had worked as a teacher of learning disabled students at the junior high school for four years. During that time she came to know her students and their parents very well. As much as she admired her students' industrious attitudes and was, as she put it, a "hard task-master" she felt that schooling took a toll upon these young people.

> They've struggled, most of them, the ones who have been chosen for this program. . . .They're gone through who knows what horrors in the regular stream . . . to finally get far enough behind so that someone will recognize their problem. . . . They are frightened, they feel inferior and then they come into this self-contained environment, away from their peers. It reinforces this feeling they have, *"I'm not worthy of being in a regular classroom with regular people."*. . . In this program I have to try to undo some of the psychological mess that these children have gone through, that they carry with them. . . . I try to get them to develop a sense of worth and this should come from within. But it doesn't. All this "without" business. All the evaluation comes from outside. They are

made to feel less worthy, [for instance], because they cannot read fluently or as well as their peers. (1, pp. 10-11)

In other words, just in order to be considered eligible for a learning disabled class a child has to fall at least two grade levels below his/her peers. Any "successful" child who was fortunate enough to make it into her program was already experiencing feelings of "inferiority," Karen explained. Although she "truly believed" her program was able to provide the kind of remediation and "strategy training" students needed in order to "become independent learners" (1, p. 10) Karen's experience informed her that this improvement came at a great cost. First of all, as she mentioned, it had to be made apparent to all (the diagnostician, the teacher, the parent and the child) that the child was "a failure" at school before he or she was selected for the LD program. Consistently failing at school tasks, going through "extensive diagnostic testing," wondering if one would be accepted, and then finally upon acceptance to be placed in an "isolated, self-contained classroom" (1, p. 11), segregated from one's peers made a child feel "insecure, worried and angry," (1, p. 13) Karen contended.

Being chosen to be part of a select group (only 40 junior high students in the city in 1990) is only one of the many difficulties LD students encounter, Karen added. They have to endure the "ridicule of their peers who make fun of them because they are not in a regular program and junior high kids can be very cruel," Karen added. Her students "were embarrassed to be seen in the LD room and made [her] shut the door so they would not be seen" (1, p. 27). Karen reminded me that "these are all studious children we are talking about; to be placed in the program they all tend to be [and there is no doubt] that something drives these children to succeed. [However] these kids have to give

up so much to achieve academic success" (1, p. 10). Karen gave an example of what she meant:

> I give them double the homework, I double everything. I don't [allow them] to realize that there are other things to life other than school and homework. . . . They need this extensive training over the two years. . . to be successfully integrated into regular classes in grade nine. (1, pp. 14-15).

Success in the LD program also takes its toll on parents, Karen added. The children who make it into the program, she maintained, are "the children whose parents are fighters, advocates" (1, p. 22). Teachers tend to be critical of such parents, she said, and "maybe they do come in a little too aggressive" (1, p. 20). However, in order to "get help for their children, the parents had to fight" (2, p. 7). Karen admitted that she "could never do [her] program without the parents":

> Their year is as busy as the children's. . . . The program is contingent on parents' support. There are a lot of meetings and they must be ready for them. I'm in constant contact with the parents. I know it must be exhausting for them. But the children and I don't take the program lightly and I don't think the parents should either. . . . The parent must go hand in hand with the child in this program. (1, pp. 20-22)

I asked Karen if she was suggesting that "children who don't have this parental support tend to do poorly in the LD program" (1, p. 22). "That's what I believe," Karen responded. And perhaps that is why, she implied, some people think the program is "elite" (1, p. 22). Teachers tend to criticize these children because "they fail to stand on their own, but they don't have 'it' to stand on," she continued. "I don't take offence to their support system, [whether it is] a parent, a teacher aide or a spell-checker. But many people do. There is just no understanding or appreciation of these children's difficulties" (1, p. 26), Karen concluded.

Theme four: The school board bureaucracy is not conducive to good pedagogy

Karen was aware that a child's entry into a learning disability program, was due, in part, to parental pressure. With only ten students admitted in a particular class in any one year, parental interest was certainty a significant factor. Karen also acknowledged that the parents' interest in their children's schooling had positive influences within her particular program. She believed that it was only with parents' devotion and hard work that LD children were able to experience the academic success they did over the two years. Therefore, in some respects, Karen enjoyed the beneficial effects of the political power of parents.

However, there were times that Karen was very critical of school board "politics." Placement of special needs students was an ongoing concern of her's. She said she "was asked for her input" about individual student placement but essentially her advice was "ignored" (2, p. 6). This angered her because she often "devoted incredible amounts of time and energy to write up recommendations for certain children" but found after all this work she was not listened to (2, p. 5). Karen informed me that there was only "so much funding and only so many labels given out and if the criteria were not exact or you didn't have a parent yelling you would be unable to get the label or the money" (2, p. 5). She added, "When they talk of placement downtown, they forget they are talking about little lives. [They just say], "Put one here. Stick one there. No, he can't go there" (2, p. 4). Karen shared two particular anecdotes which reveal her frustration:

> 1. Let me tell you something I will never forget. This was placement and I was just adamant about the needs of this child and my administrator said to me, *"You can't get emotional over this."* The message to me was, *"This is the cut-off point; you don't have any rights over here so stop right here and things will be done just the way they need to be done."* . . . How can

it not be an emotional situation? . . . . I have a commitment to this child and I feel very strongly about where this child should be going and I am told not to get emotional about this! He was undermining who I was and what I believed in. I thought to myself: *"It's the system. It's just too big. It is remote and removed."* (2, p. 5)

2. Once, I had this group of kids who made great gains. I thought they needed some, not a lot of, support money when they went to high school. I made a case for each of the children, documented the data, did everything I could to get them the help, the money, they needed. The answer was: *"Not in policy."* So I went to the parents and gave them copies of everything I suggested. . . . I was well aware that the parents had more power than I did and I encouraged them to carry the baton. . . . According to the principal I was jeopardizing his job by doing this. The parents followed through though and were able to get the help their children needed. It was a fight, mind you. (2, pp. 5 & 8)

"Unfortunately," Karen concluded, "the system's needs are met in terms of numbers. . . Downtown just doesn't have the context in which to see the needs of the child. . . . Teachers should be really involved in placement and they are not" (2, pp. 5-7).

Theme five: The meaning of learning disability varies, depending upon the time, the place, and the person

The school system in which Karen taught began a pilot program for learning disabled students in the fall of 1985. When she herself began teaching learning disabled students the pilot had already been in place three years. Previous to 1988, Karen had taught adaptation students for about ten years. During her 15 years of experience, she had witnessed many changes in special education, learning disability in particular. She explained what things were like in 1978:

In 1978, I came right out of university to teach in an adaptation program. Although they were called adaptation, you would have a sprinkling of learning disabled children. . . . [If] LD children weren't there, they would have been in the regular program, struggling. . . . What

> bothered me was that these self-contained classes were supposed to be the answer but eventually became a dumping ground for everything and anything. You name it: behaviour disordered, emotionally disturbed, autistic, everything. (1, pp. 1 & 3)

The arrival of the LD pilot program in 1985 changed special education considerably. "Before the pilot, everyone was adaptation" (3, p. 16), Karen said. She added, "When the pilot began, the IQ stipulation gave it distinction. They tried to purify it, to remove the most capable children" (3, p.16) and for the most part, Karen found the students in her LD program to be quite intelligent. Many had "IQs of 125 to 130," she informed me. Karen also felt the LD students could be defined by the fact that they all had "problems with reading." Although she disagreed with "the value that was placed on reading in school and society," (1, p. 10) she knew in order for the students to be successfully integrated back into the regular problem, she had to concentrate on "bringing up their reading levels" (1, p. 10). But even though she focussed on reading improvement, she still wondered why some students were able to improve in reading as quickly as they did. "You ask yourself," she said, "how can anyone improve in reading that quickly if they really are learning disabled"? Karen speculated, "Something is obviously wrong here, isn't it?" (1, p. 12).

Nevertheless, this was the special needs "group [Karen] most enjoyed working with" (3, pp. 15-16). She found LD students to be similar to one another in many respects: they were "bright," "studious," somewhat "anxious" students who were fortunate enough to have "supportive parents." However, at times, she questioned whether the criteria for LD placement were being observed.

> Last year they gave me children who were three and four years behind grade level. That was not the criterion as it was laid out for this program. . . . I don't know that anybody's that clear because I get all sorts of children. (1, p. 22)

In the final analysis, Karen decided, the terminology of LD has different associations for different people (3, p. 15). Ultimately, though, she concluded that the LD classification goes to "the top ten that placement downtown thinks can benefit from this program" (1, p. 23).

Through her school experiences over the years Karen found that what she calls the "true definition of LD" (2, p. 1) was not always correctly and consistently applied. She told of a recent situation in the city where many parents had been taking their children out of the public system, at the expense of the public system, and enrolling them in a private school for disabled learners. Parents had removed their children because they had been able to show that the public system was unable to provide a satisfactory education for their special needs children. Karen said that because "there was so much money leaving the system going to a private academy our system said, *'Okay, we have an academy now'* " (2, p. 2). Karen was especially concerned about how the students for this new LD school were being selected. "The school is supposed to cater to learning disabilities," [she stated, yet] "you don't have a clean package here or a clear population; it's a diverse group; there are few similarities" (2, p. 1). I asked Karen if she was "suggesting that there wasn't really anything uniting the children apart from poor achievement in school" (1, p. 2). She responded by saying, "That's it. There is such a range. It's a catch-all" (1. p. 2). She thought alternative placement for LD students in a separate school may have been a good idea but felt that "LD, in the true sense of what LD means was not going on there. [Karen contended that] the school board solved the issue very quickly but it wasn't clearly thought through" (2, p. 2).

Karen also noticed that many of the pilot schools had changed their LD programs since the inception of the program in 1985.

> None of the classes have an aide any more, although at first they all had one teacher, one aide and 10 children. . . . . After the pilot was over, the LD information was left up to the schools to interpret . . . and LD means different things to different people. . . . Many people in special education are not even familiar with the special LD grouping. So many things are lumped into it. . . . Some schools are doing LD as a resource room. . . . Now this is not to say it's the same in the separate system or in B.C. though. (3, pp. 15-16)

I asked Karen what she believed were the advantages, considering all these difficulties and differences, to a junior or senior high child being identified as learning disabled. She said there were many: "They are given support, they are watched over, someone helps them with exams, they are given scribes if they need them, given more time to write exams." She added, "Just the fact that two to three 80-minute periods a week are devoted to problem solving and keeping the child on track. That's what they get, someone to watch over them" (3, p. 17).

However, Karen wondered just how long support programs would exist. She found LD was beginning to "encompass so many sub-groups that the term was becoming meaningless" (1, p. 8). She thought what might "happen is that we are going to sub-group ourselves into such a big budget mess because we cannot afford to finance these specialized programs" (1, p. 9).

In some respects Karen thought the future looked rather bleak for learning disability.

> It looks like we are going to lose more services, just because of the economy. . . . Unless the parents continue to be the voice, the programs for pure LD will go by the wayside. I believe we are going to lose the groundwork for pure LD and there will be more mainstreaming. . . . The field is still fragmented totally. . . but I think all of the different viewpoints on LD [will be] directed towards more of an instructional focus. That is to

> accommodate mainstreaming. There is no longer the idea of clumping the students back into self-contained pockets so we are looking at instruction instead. (3, pp. 19-20)

In the final analysis, Karen admitted she was "in a bit of a conflict" about the value of LD programs.

> When you have children in your classroom who have IQs of 130 and when you find a way to help them learn it is so exciting; it is so rewarding. . . . However, there is no magic and there is nothing special we are doing. . . [that a regular classroom teacher couldn't do]. . . . Yet I realize we have neither the tools or resources in a large classroom. (3, pp. 3-4 & 15)

Karen said she had personally experienced "a lot of success with the program [and] truly believes in what the [LD] program does." However, she said she cannot help but "wonder if things had been in place for some of these children in a regular classroom" (1, p. 12) that perhaps the program would not have been necessary after all.

Vanore

Vanore was the third teacher I met when I was holding preliminary meetings with prospective participants for my research study. I met with her in the company of Dorothy, another teacher for the learning disabled on May 29, 1990. Their elementary school had two self-contained LD classrooms, one for the primary division and one for the intermediate grades. Both Vanore, who was the intermediate teacher and Dorothy, the primary teacher, had questions about my study. Because the school was one of the original (1985) pilot schools, they had had many requests from people at the university interested in doing research over the past few years. As a result, they were becoming quite selective about the projects with which they were willing to become involved.

When I explained the notion of conversational research to them, Dorothy expressed doubt that they could talk about learning disability for an extended length of time. However, when I explained that I was interested in coming at the meaning of learning from another angle -- that of daily classroom experiences and teacher understanding -- they were more receptive. Vanore expressed another concern: she was unsure about whether she was free to discuss issues that were "political" in nature. I did not have a ready answer for her apart from the fact that she was assured anonymity in the study. However, because there were so few schools offering the LD program she felt any comments she made could be traced back to her. I agreed that that could be a concern and told her I certainly did not want her to say anything that might jeopardize her position. I also informed her that if, upon reading the transcripts and initial themes, there was anything she found objectionable, it could be modified or removed. She also mentioned that they had been told not to talk too much about the LD program to anyone. I was not quite certain what that meant but responded by saying my interests were not really in the "political area" although I recognized that politics played a part in learning disability and for that reason politics may come up in the conversations. She seemed satisfied with my responses and we talked no further about these matters.

I left the initial meeting that day, thinking both Vanore and Dorothy were dedicated, hard-working teachers. Before I left I mentioned that if both were interested, perhaps we could consider the idea of a three way conversation. I realized, though, it might be difficult to give them both opportunities to voice their concerns. They were agreeable to the idea, saying they got along very well and agreed on almost everything. I was not at all certain at this time, however, if they were truly interested in pursuing my research question with me. I said I would call in a week or so after they had time to think the idea over.

When I called a week later, Vanore said that Dorothy was taking on a new position as an assistant principal the next year but she, herself, would be interested. I thanked her for her interest and support and dropped off sample questions for our first conversation as well as a more complete letter of explanation about my research project (see Appendix A, parts one and two). At that time we arranged to have our first formal conversation on June 25, 1990.

Vanore had been teaching the LD program at Stevenson Elementary School for the past four years when I first met her. Previous to that she had taught adaptation classes for four years and primary school for one year. Even in high school, she told me, she knew she wanted to become involved in one of the helping professions but was not at all certain at that time what her choice would be. After she graduated from high school, she enrolled in secretarial school for a year and then worked in that field for three years, saving enough money to go to university. She was accepted into the B. Ed program in elementary education, specializing in special education, and graduated four years later. Although she was committed to teaching special education, she asked for a regular grade placement the first year she taught so that she "could see what a 'regular' student was like" (1, p. 1). She said it was a wonderful first year for her but she "still knew special education was what she wanted" (1, p. 1). She taught adaptation classes for the next four years before coming to Stevenson Elementary.

Apart from options such as music, physical education and art, Vanore taught her students most of the other subjects at Stevenson. Few students were integrated into regular classrooms. The 10-12 students she taught stayed in the program for two years, usually grades four and five, and then returned to regular classrooms for grade six. Because this was one of the only two south side

learning disability sites most of the students were from out of area. Therefore, most of the LD students stayed in Stevenson Elementary for only the two years.

Our first conversation was held at Vanore's school during an extended lunch hour. It lasted approximately an hour and a half and, for a large part, revolved around the assessment of learning disabled students, placement and subsequent instruction. In the following quotation, Vanore illustrated her expectations of school board specialists:

> As a teacher, one of the things you look for from the specialists are recommendations. If I ask for a reassessment, it's to make sure I haven't missed something. I rarely ask for a reassessment but when I do, it's to find out why, when I have tried everything, a child has not made gains. I need to see if there is a further, say, "processing difficulty." Basically for me, testing is to check things out, to make sure there's nothing I am missing. I am also interested in what other recommendations can be made to help me teach the child. (1, p. 16)

The second conversation took place almost two years later on April 26, 1992. We spent the first part of the conversation clarifying and correcting some of the information on the transcriptions. Although we had been away from the conversation for a lengthy period of time, we had no difficulty picking up where we had left off. In fact, if anything, the intervening years had helped each of us to reflect more deeply upon the meaning of learning disability. We spent a good part of the conversation discussing the differences between learning disabled children and other low achievers. Vanore told me how, in her opinion, a learning disabled child differs from an adaptation child.

> In adaptation, the pacing is different and there is a lot more repetition. I remember when I taught adaptation, language development was a very large part of the program. You stressed vocabulary a lot. These [LD] kids are very verbal. The odd one has a language processing difficulty but you are dealing with a certain kind of intelligence and capability; they are so verbal. (2, p. 3)

Sixteen months later, on August 25, our third and last conversation took place. At this point in time, Vanore had been accepted into the Master's Program in the department of educational psychology and she was quite excited about the prospect of spending her sabbatical year studying at the university. The first part of the conversation dealt with Vanore's concerns about the transcriptions. She told me that she was worried about the possibility of being misinterpreted if she was quoted out of context; she mentioned that some things "sounded pretty bad" when taken in isolation. There were also a few comments she wanted to qualify and rephrase. I asked her if when she had read over the themes and the supporting comments, she thought I was "using her comments in the wrong way." She replied, "No, I stand by what I said [and] I have no problem with the themes." I quickly made the few clarifications Vanore wanted and said I would take special care with any passages I included, trying to make certain that she was not misrepresented. These changes and my assurances about being careful with supporting quotations seemed to resolve the issue and we then moved into a more substantive conversation about learning disability.

We addressed a wide variety of topics in this lengthy two hour session but seemed to devote considerable attention to the changes in special education that had been occurring over the last five or so years. In the following excerpt, Vanore explained the difficulty a person has adjusting to changing school board policies.

> If you phone downtown, it is all under one umbrella and they change the name of it every year. Now it is *"programming for student differences, accommodating student differences."* They seem to change it every year. They do not have a special education consultant; they do not have a behaviour-disorder consultant. They say they have people who have expertise in that area. What they are trying to get away from are these strict categories. I think the idea is to get more into mainstreaming and so we are not going to label as much. However, they do have people

> available who have a bent or specialization who you can talk to. I think they are doing it for the public image but I think we are going to have to go back to the clearer classifications. (3, p. 16)

Over the course of the three conversations, we explored a variety of issues surrounding the question of the meaning of learning disability. Altogether the thematic analysis yielded 38 initial themes, all of which were acceptable to Vanore. When the three conversations were taken as a whole text, five overall themes seemed to emerge. The themes are as follows:

1. LD children are different from regular students and other special needs children
2. the LD child must be accommodated but not excused
3. LD children must learn strategies to compensate for their disability
4. although there are problems associated with the LD label, it would be a mistake to eliminate it
5. although teaching LD students is a rewarding and worthwhile endeavor, an LD teacher is often beset by uncertainties and worries

Theme one: A learning disabled child is different from regular students and other special needs children

It was at university that Vanore first heard the term learning disability but "it didn't really make much of an impression" upon her at the time. She remembers it as "an interesting idea because [it was unlike] mentally handicapped where they knew a lot of the answers and the causes" (1, p. 2).

Vanore defined learning disabled children as the ones with "a lot of potential who are not reaching it for some reason" (1, p. 13). They are the ones for whom teachers "are doing all the right things and it is still not happening for them" (1, p. 18), the ones who "forget things from one day to the next [even though] they have done these things over and over" (3, p. 13; 1, p. 20). Children

from the LD group may have "time concept problems," "organizational problems" (2, pp. 1, 3, & 19) and/or "difficulties with spelling and writing" (2, p. 11) which prevents them from reaching "their potential." However, these learning disabilities are not to be confused with "laziness" (1, p. 14) or lack of intelligence (2, p. 3), Vanore contended. That is why "testing is needed to check for specific learning disabilities" (1, p. 15) and to "rule out the possibility that the child is not another label such as adaptation" (1, p. 15). Vanore thought that "there was a fine line between an adaptation child and an LD child" but that a test such as WISC-R would differentiate between them (1, p. 15). "A [high] IQ score would be the confirmation that the ability was there but was not being assessed [by regular classroom evaluation]" (1, p. 17).

By the time of our third conversation, Vanore had taught learning disabled classes for seven years and was convinced that "LD was a specific audience" (3, p. 16). She found the LD students, with few exceptions, "to have a terrific sense of humour [and she] admired their guts and their courage" (3, p. 13). LD students, according to her, "are inquisitive kids, always wanting to know why" (2, p. 5). Some are "extremely gifted . . . and tend to be right-brained sort of people who have a kind of creative brilliance, [although, she added], not all LD children are like this, of course" (3, p. 20). Vanore also saw differences between an adaptation child and an LD child. First of all, LD children were "more verbal" (1, p. 16); the "pacing is different [with LD children] and there is a lot more repetition" (2, p. 3). "Ultimately though," Vanore believed, "it was the IQ score that was the deciding factor in all of the documentation" (2, p. 3) that was used to determine whether a child was learning disabled or not. Vanore explained how the school board pilot program which began in 1985 helped people understand learning disability.

> The pilot project [showed us] the kids who don't fit: they aren't adaptation, they aren't behaviour disordered. . . . They are kids who should be able to achieve and we wonder why they don't. Something is going on in those children and we need to find out what it is -- to give them that chance. (2, p. 4)

Vanore admitted, though, that the school board's criteria for assessing learning disability was not foolproof. She said "just because a child does not meet the criteria does not mean he is not LD" (3, p. 6). In the following excerpt, Vanore illustrated how difficult it is for her at times to develop an ethical stance when dealing with pre-set school board policy and the educational needs of the children.

> There is another thing. What about the kids who . . . don't meet the criteria of the program? . . . We tell parents, *"Sharon does not qualify this year"* and in some cases we know that soon she will fail and then she will fit the criteria. . . . That has always been my concern: we are giving parents mixed messages saying, *"Yes, she may be learning disabled but she does not belong in this program."* . . . I just hate telling any parent that their child isn't LD. [Rather we have to say] that they just don't fit our criteria for this particular program. (3, pp. 6-8, 4 & 16)

Although Vanore thought it inevitable that some children will never "fit that magic criteria and . . . fall through the loopholes. . . the only way around some of these difficulties, she believed, was to always look at the criteria and re-evaluate them, always keep challenging them" (3, p. 5). Regardless of these problems though, Vanore felt confident enough to make a generalization about the child and his or her disability. She believed LD children never "truly outgrow their learning disability" nor does the disability "go away" or "disappear" (3, p. 8). When I asked if "the learning disability is part of what these children are," she responded,

> I think it is always there. . . . I just think they learn how to cope with it. I think in some ways they learn how to accept that's the way they are; they don't fight it any more. . . . I don't think I would ever say that this child has

> had two years in this program and now does not have a learning disability . . . . You may say that a child has done remarkably well and does not need that kind of assistance any more, but outgrow, no. (3, pp. 8-9)

Theme two: The learning disabled child must be accommodated, but not excused

Because an LD child has "great potential" and because a child's learning disability is "always with him or her," (3, p. 8) Vanore thinks that teachers have to be more accepting of student differences. She said teachers have to be "more open, more flexible, more willing to hear what LD kids need [without getting] their backs up right away" (1, p. 6). Teachers need to find ways "to assess the information [an LD child has] and to find out how to get it out" (2, p. 8). To operate in such a manner with children means to become more accommodating, Vanore contends. She explained more precisely what she means by "accommodating" a child, noting how it is different from "excusing."

> I don't see accommodation as excusing the child. Accommodation varies in all sorts of ways and degrees. For very little accommodation a child might only need to have directions clarified, for instance. It might just mean being extra clear. It might not even be a day to day thing, perhaps just something that has to be done for a major assignment or test. Perhaps it means getting a study buddy or something. . . . For the moderate kids it might be making sure the homework book is being filled out. If you are marking for social studies then give these kids a break on the mechanics or let them have access to a computer where they can use a spell-check so that they can have a chance. . . . What you want to get across to teachers is that these accommodations are not really major things. (2, p. 6)

Vanore has discovered that LD "kids need structure" (2, p. 5); she said you "can't just tell them to go home and study -- they need more explicit instructions than that" (2, p. 8). According to Vanore, LD children have "more of an oral orientation" (2, p. 8) and they have trouble with "spelling and

mechanics" (1, p. 23). What we need, she advised, is "room for them to answer in a different manner, to be tested differently" (3, p. 9).

I mentioned to Vanore that some teachers get upset when "children classified as LD get readers or scribes for tests" (2, p. 7) because they do not then know how to evaluate the child. She responded by saying,

> If you take a verbal kid and he is able to tell you the answer but when he has to write, he freezes, the advocate in me says, *" I know you have it up there"* [Therefore, I think] you have to accept the oral response or allow a scribe to get it down in writing. I don't think it's fair to penalize a kid who can't write. (2, pp. 7-8)

According to Vanore, because LD children have "some blockage, missing link or some connector that is just not there, . . . we have to give them every advantage" (2, p. 8) in order to "help them get through" (1, p. 23). Vanore offered some suggestions for regular classroom teachers:

> We should not mark for spelling, mechanics, or structure in certain subjects [but instead] mark for concepts [Although] teachers may find it difficult to read papers full of mechanical and organizational errors, they need to see past [the surface appearance] to look for understanding. . . . Some kids, [for instance] can show through drawing that they understand. [Unless you accommodate] and allow LD children [other ways] to demonstrate their learning. . . you are setting the child up for failure. (1, p. 23; 2, p. 8)

Vanore wanted to make quite certain, however, that people understood that she is not suggesting that LD students be excused from various school tasks. She stated, "Although it's wonderful to be accepting we still have to put some demands upon the child; there has to be some accountability, some ownership" (1, p. 8) on the child's part. She advises teachers "to put the responsibility back on the child by saying such things as, *'I'd like to help you but what are you prepared to do?"* She thinks LD students still have to work on their skills but accommodation is "giving them a way to cope" (1, p. 23) with their

disability. And although it may be frustrating for teachers to differentiate instruction and to allow separate evaluative tasks, they must do these things if they want the LD child to develop in school.

Theme three: Learning disabled children must learn strategies to compensate for their disabilities

Vanore would argue that one of the most significant ways LD students can "develop ownership" and become "accountable" for their learning is to acquire strategies to "compensate for their disabilities" (3, p. 8). This particular theme was one we kept returning to in all the conversations and was obviously of central importance to Vanore. The LD program that Vanore followed consisted of three basic parts: "self-esteem, structure and strategies" (2, p. 5). She said she "worked on self-esteem constantly" and "gave students lots of structure" (2, p. 5). However, the biggest emphasis was placed on strategies. When I asked Vanore if she could explain what a strategy was, this was her response:

> To me the strategy . . . is a way, the "how to do it." Sometimes we say, *"Another trick is. . . ."* But I don't like the word "trick"; it sounds devious, like it's cheating. Instead, I like to call it "thinking smart." . . . When we show students alternative [ways of doing things] they seem surprized that it isn't considered cheating. (2, p.11)

Vanore went on to give an example of a strategy she uses:

> One we do, a visualization technique, is called RIDER. Most good readers visualize. The LD kids aren't doing that active process. So with the visualization strategy we talk it through with them, showing as the author introduces more information, they may have to adjust their picture, their visualization. Often they get off on tangents, picturing it the way they see it. They have to learn to work within the author's writing, changing their predictions, adjusting as they are given more information. (2, p. 10)

According to Vanore, because there are no "magical cures" for learning disability, "the best we can do is give the child strategies" (1, p. 7). Therefore, she "bombards [her] students with as many strategies as she can" (3, p. 12), trying "to hit the right way, the right strategy, the right learning style that can make it work for a child" (1, p. 17).

Vanore argued that what LD teachers are trying to do when they teach strategies is to replicate what *"normal* kids do without knowing they do it" (3, p. 13). The "reading that [Vanore has] done suggests to her that LD children are not doing the metacognitive -- that conscious questioning that you and I automatically do" (3, p. 13). The idea, Vanore said, is to have LD students "start doing what successful kids are doing" (3, p. 13).

In order for the strategies to work, Vanore told me, students must "work at them very conscientiously" (3, p. 8). They "need to practise the strategies" (1, p. 22) [until they] "become a pattern or habit" (2, p. 12) and it has to be "much more than hit or miss" (2, p. 10).

Introducing "these strategies earlier in a child's life [would have been] really helpful," Vanore thinks. She said if there had been "earlier intervention" these students "might not have needed special help" (2, p. 10). Vanore was convinced that the "earlier we catch these [disabilities] the less complex they become" (3, p. 18). She mentioned that she is excited about new developments in diagnostic testing which "catch disabilities earlier now" (3, p. 19). Vanore hopes that if an "LD child can be taught earlier, [pre-school, for instance,] how to solve problems, how to think something through, how to self-teach. . . , it may cut down on being impulsive, not following through" (3, p. 19).

As optimistic as she is though, Vanore would be the first to admit that strategies have their limitations. "Some days," she mused, "you know that something is not working for them" (1, p. 18). Vanore went on to give a

particular example of students experiencing difficulty when trying to identify words:

> They can pick the strategy and it will be the wrong one. For example, if they picked word families as a strategy -- one that comes to mind is *ite* and the child tries *ight* instead. So they've got a good strategy but it's the wrong word family. Sometimes too, it's a hit and miss approach for them or maybe [they will give up] and say, *"I am not going to try a different strategy because that one didn't work."* [And I have to help them by saying,] *" Maybe it's not a word family word. Maybe you have to look for the little word. Maybe it's a multi-graph word where you have to chunk it."* I wonder if they're not quite as patient with themselves [on those bad days] and not willing to try different strategies. . . . [At times] those kids can look you in the eye and you know they don't know. I have no idea why the strategy isn't working. It seems like everything has vanished for them. . . . I can even give them the word and they don't recognize it. (1, p. 19)

Vanore also admitted that the sheer quantity of strategies can be confusing for the LD child at times. She mentioned that she "has to be very careful about bringing in new things, new strategies because it is very easy to throw the students off balance" (2, p. 5). Vanore recognizes that by "exposing the students to a lot of strategies, [they may become] confused and forgetful" (1, p. 18). However, she added, the "confusion" and the "hit and miss" are just "part of the learning" and "hopefully they will get over that the more they practise" (3, p. 12). In the final analysis, Vanore thinks that "any increase is good" (2, p. 11) and although nothing is promised, "with strategies [the LD student] is more likely to become successful" (2, p. 6).

Theme four: Although teaching learning disabled students is a rewarding and worthwhile endeavor, an LD teacher is often beset by uncertainties and worries

Unlike "regular" classroom teaching which is tied to grade and subject divisions, instruction for learning disabled students focusses on accommodating

non-achieving students in a small, often segregated, mixed-age-group setting. Elementary LD teachers such as Vanore follow the program of studies for the most part but the skills, concepts and attitudes of the subject areas are taught in conjunction with "self-esteem, structure and strategies." LD students, with some exceptions, enter the LD program sometime during their elementary, junior or senior high school years, stay for two years and then return to regular classroom instruction. The temporary nature of the LD program brings with it a series of difficulties and Vanore often worries about how her students will fare once they join the "mainstream." In the following excerpt, she discussed her worries:

> When you see the progress the kids have made and often the leaps they made, it's wonderful. But when you talk about them being ready for grade seven, it's pretty scary. . . . They may have made wonderful gains but still are not academically ready for grade seven. . . . [I have] some concerns about things such as -- are teachers even looking at the cumulative record cards? Are principals aware that they have LD children in their junior highs? . . . I worry that the child will just be "plunked in" without the teacher being aware. (1, p. 5)

Vanore always spends a considerable amount of time writing "year end suggestions and summaries" for each of her students and she "hopes [although never really knows if] someone will read them" (1, p. 23). She also worries that junior high teachers might think the LD students are "adaptation" and she wonders whether teachers will be "willing to accommodate LD children" (2, pp. 2 & 6).

One of the major objectives of the two year program is to have LD students become "self-advocates." However, Vanore was always concerned about whether her LD students would be able to speak out for themselves in junior high school. "It is a concern," Vanore explained, "because junior high does not lend itself to mom or dad coming in every day to question the teacher"

(1, p. 6). Vanore added, "We don't want these students to [continue] to rely upon us" (3, p. 12); they need to become independent.

Because the LD program is only a temporary respite in a child's educational career, Vanore's pedagogy had to be oriented towards the time when the child was no longer an LD student. Although day to day student success is a goal for the LD program, Vanore always had to have her eye on the future. She talked about how torn she was about this at certain times:

> We have to be careful when accommodating. I can't take the children from grade five to high school holding their hands. There is always the fine line where I keep giving them the tools [yet] pushing them away. I let them rely upon me when they need me and to trust me when they are trying something new but always in my mind I [focus] on letting them go and that means they can do it. [This can be] a frustrating experience because you are working with someone who knows it one day and does not know it the next. (3, pp. 11 & 13)

Vanore found that the future was a serious concern for the parents of LD children as well. She said that at first "parents feel good [about] their child being placed in the program [but they wonder] what will happen after the two years are over." She added, "The progress the child will make [and what he or she will be doing in junior high is always] in the backs of their minds [just as] it is with mine" (1, pp. 6-7).

Another concern for Vanore is the lack of follow-up for students who have been in the LD program over the years She felt she "needed to know what was not working and why or what they should do instead." She said that "usually we don't know how students are doing [but] somehow there should be a way of tracking these kids" (1, p. 24).

A further frustration that Vanore experiences has to do with what she calls "the politics of LD." She explained:

> I am often placed in the political position which is so hard for me where I am saying your child does not belong in the program but that does not mean your child is not learning disabled. . . . [Sometimes] I have to tell parents that if student placement tells them [their child] does not fit the program then I can't really help them. . . . [It is] really hard for me to say, *"I can't get them into the program; I don't have any pull there. . . . [All] I can give you are some names downtown and things like that."* . . . . You want to try to help [parents] without getting into it. . . . [I know] I could say, *"Look, I'm a teacher of LD kids. I only teach the program. As soon as your kid's in, give me a call. If he doesn't get in, don't call me."* But the human side, the non-politics part says, *"God, what if it were my kid?"*. . . You try not to make a *faux pas*. . . but there are criteria and there are kids. . . . It isn't that easy, you know. (3, pp. 4 & 7)

Theme five: Although there are problems associated with the LD label, it would be a mistake to eliminate it

Right from our first meeting, Vanore expressed a concern about the use of labels. Initially, it was not the term "learning disabled" that troubled her; it was the word "normal." It was only in subsequent conversations, especially the final one, that Vanore shared some of her uncertainties about the words "learning disability." She told me she would rather use the term "not regular" when speaking of special needs students even though "regular bothered [her] a bit" (1, p. 3) as well. "Basically though," Vanore informed me, "I don't tend to get hung up on labels. She said, "We just label throughout society so we know what we've talking about. Labels aren't meant as a put-down. They are just meant for identification or, maybe more correctly, for funding but not anything negative" (1, p. 3).

Vanore suggested that an LD label was important because if a teacher did not "look at a cumulative record card she might think that [a particular] student was just not bright or something." She added, "The LD label gives us a whole other outlook when deciding how to treat a child" (2, p. 2). Vanore explained further why labels are important to her as a teacher:

> You need enough of a label so that you can do some programming for children. If you look at the educational programming for a Down's syndrome child, it is very different from a gifted child or an LD child, for example. . . . I know each child is an individual and all that but [with a label] at least we have a category or a range to work in. (3, p. 16)

Vanore worries that "LD is starting to become a catch-all for everything" (2, p. 2). She informed me that before this one umbrella called "programming for student differences" came into existence in the school board, there were "stricter categories of learning disabled, behaviour disordered, adaptation" (3, p. 15). "Now," she said, "people are using LD in general for everything" (3, p.16). She explained, "If we now have a Down's syndrome child I can say she is learning disabled" (3. p. 16). When I mentioned that that statement had some truth in it because "certainly such a child would have some learning disabilities" (3, p. 16), her reply was,

> To me the picture is very different. . . . If you say, *"I don't like saying adaptation, I don't like saying mentally handicapped, I don't like saying Down's syndrome so we will just call all of them learning disabled"* how can you differentiate? . . . I don't think that's progress. I think that is a very safe way of not offending people. (3, p. 16)

Vanore wanted to maintain distinct special needs categories such as "learning disabled" which helped distinguish one special needs child from another. However, she was willing to acknowledge that such sharp distinctions mean "that we're missing some of the children" (3, p. 4). In other words, Vanore recognized that there are some needy and deserving children who, because they either do not meet the criteria for LD or have not been assessed at all, receive no corrective program. She showed her concern in the following excerpt.

> What about the kids that don't get into these programs and get the help they need. We know their problems don't go away. It is only a matter of years before these kids become problems in some way. . . . With LD there are so many different characteristics. . . . It is just so hard to pin down. . . . I teach a very specialized program with this set criteria. . . . [But] we know that other kids out there have learning disabilities on that continuum who are not in my program. . . . I have no idea of knowing how many. What about those kids? They don't have to be part of a million dollar program but they need their needs met too. (3, pp. 6, 7 & 13)

Vanore thought that some of the reluctance to give LD labels to certain students was due, in part, to budgetary constraints.

> Money wise, how do you reach all these kids? . . . To be honest I don't see how they can continue to fund these programs as they have been doing. . . . If you label me you have to put me in this program and [what if] you just don't have the money. So now suddenly, you are going to have to be very careful about labelling students. . . . The minute we label, it's special programming and that means money. (3, pp. 14 & 17)

Vanore said she realizes there is no escape from the reality of budgetary considerations and inadequate and imprecise assessment practices (3, p.13). However, she is not satisfied with the school board's current move towards a general special needs division called "accommodating student differences" (3, p. 15). Vanore showed her concern about what she sees as the future prospects of learning disability.

> Learning disabilities. . . is becoming very political. . . . Every year we think we should call our program something different. . . . Quite frankly, I'm [getting] tired of it all. To me, we are talking a specific audience when we are talking LD. . . . You can give new labels and that's okay but we still have to focus on the educational programming for the child and that is the bottom line for the teacher (3, pp. 15-18).

Vanore concluded by suggesting that this lack of precision exacerbated by recent school board mainstreaming policies and shifting conceptual

categories in special needs education indicates that learning disability may cease to mean anything substantive soon.

Commentary on the Participants' Meanings

A series of nine conversations I held with three teacher participants formed the basis for this hermeneutic inquiry into learning disability. In this chapter my task was to orient myself in a dialogical manner with the texts of these conversations in order to disclose the participants' understandings of the meaning of learning disability. Gadamer's hermeneutic "model of conversation between two people" (1989, p. 378) guided my interpretive attitude when I sat down with the texts of these conversations. Just as I had tried to reach an understanding about learning disability with each participant in the actual spoken conversations, so too was I attempting to come to a dialogical understanding with the written transcriptions of these conversations.

Seeking meaning through hermeneutic interpretation modelled on Gadamer's notion of conversation reflects a faith that "in some sense truth will be found in the text" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 21). It further suggests that the lived experiences of teachers are a valuable resource for coming to a deeper understanding of the meaning of learning disability. This connection to the everyday lifeworld of being with and teaching LD students gives the study its ontological grounding. Looking more closely at the way learning disability is experienced in schools opens a space for understandings to emerge which are different from those of the objectifying sciences. The research conversations and their subsequent interpretation are an attempt to break through the customary frames of instrumental technical thinking by forging a link with the practical needs and everyday experiences of learning disabled children and their teachers. This chapter provided the opportunity to step back, away from

the constructions of science, to look again at the way learning disability is experienced in the lives of students and teachers.

In order to disclose the lived understandings of the teacher participants it was necessary to adopt a position of trust towards what it was that teachers were saying about learning disability. This trust, however, was something more than a naïve or blind faith in what was being expressed by the teachers. The interpreted meanings are not just a mere repetition of what the teachers said in the research conversations. Instead, the hermeneutic task was to "find the resources in [my] language and experiences [to enable me to express what teachers were trying to say about learning disability] "without imposing blind or distorting prejudices" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 141) on what it was they were saying. This meant I had to try to think with the participants, to try to experience their local and specific situation with them and finally to express their understandings in a truthful and particularly personal manner so that a new and deeper understanding of learning disability could be revealed.

Assuming an attitude of trust towards the participants' words meant that I had to carefully attend to their claims and also to value their unique attitudes when writing the interpretations. However, this hermeneutic attitude of trust towards what participants are saying is something other than trying to discern the subjective intentions of the participants. Although ontological hermeneutics is intensely interested in coming to understand "the other," the intent is not to understand particular individuals better than they understand themselves, nor is it to explain in an objective sense why they may think or act the way they do. Instead the idea is to try to understand horizons other than one's own and to present these views of others as being worthy of consideration. This meant, as interpreter, I had to try to stand in for the three participants as an advocate, defending as much as possible what it was they were trying to express about

learning disability. Gadamer reminds us too "that the interpreter's own thoughts [go] into re-awakening the text's meaning" (1989, p. 388). Thus the process of understanding the participants' meanings of learning disability is a mutual endeavor between the interpreter and the participants. Both have a share in the meaning.

The themes that are presented and discussed in this chapter represent an interpretive judgement about what seems to be most powerfully present in the texts of the conversations. These are not abstract generalizations, removed from the lived experiences of teachers and LD students but metaphorically speaking are "more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived as meaningful wholes" (van Manen, 1990, p. 90). Although at times we are motivated by the hope that we can capture and illustrate through themes all that we are trying to understand about a particular notion such as learning disability, it is impossible to draw out or discuss each and every possible theme to its possible fullness. There are always residues of meaning that cannot be expressed through a thematic analysis and there is always the feeling that our themes and discussion fall short of what it is we are trying to understand. This feeling of absence or sense of incompleteness is as it should be since the intent in a hermeneutic study is not to seek closure as it is in an objective scientific study.

That there are inconsistencies, paradoxes, ambiguities and perplexities in the participants' comments, the themes themselves and the thematic discussions is strikingly obvious. However, I deliberately hold back from focussing attention on these matters in this particular chapter. My willingness to listen to the way the teachers' voices address us and to express the stories that they tell is guided by Gadamer's notion that one should not "engage in dialogue only to prove himself right" (1989, p. 363) but instead to gain insight. In

disclosing the participants' meanings my task was to try to bring out the strengths of what was said as opposed to discerning the weaknesses.

Chapter five, however, is guided by a different hermeneutic: the hermeneutics of suspicion. By approaching the text in more of an inquiring, suspicious attitude, I ask questions which focus on the heterogeneity, incommensurability, and the linguistic formations of the text. My intention in this interpretation is to come to a fuller understanding of what it is that allows us, as human beings, to make the notion of learning disability possible. Such an interpretive move is only possible, however, if we start from the place where we presently find ourselves -- the everyday experiences of learning disability teachers -- and if we first allow these meanings to question and broaden our own horizons. It is these meanings that are represented in Chapter Four.

Chapter Five

Attending to Essential Difficulties of Learning Disability

Introduction

The impetus for this study is an interest to inquire into the meaning of learning disability as a feature of the educational landscape. Of course, definitions of learning disability already exist. The most current (1988) and widely accepted definition, which does not differ significantly from the original 1968 definition, is provided by the American National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. This definition reads as follows:

> Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual [and are] presumed to be due to central nervous dysfunction. . . . (Hammill, 1990, p. 77)

However, this study does not seek an improved and more precise official definition of learning disability. Rather it seeks to understand learning disability as a lived practice which implicates teachers, parents and students. The study asks what the educational category of learning disability is pointing towards, and what the construction of this condition is saying about our understanding of the curriculum and pedagogy of public schools.

Since the interest of this study is the curricular and pedagogical meaning of learning disability, the stance of this study is hermeneutic. In Gadamer's view, hermeneutics attempts to overcome a fundamental weakness of science: its failure to reflect upon its own method. Weinsheimer explains that hermeneutics is different from science. "Whenever we attempt to examine the

ground we are standing on, there we are engaged in hermeneutical reflection -- not natural science" (1985, p. 32).

Within the conventional natural science discourse that has informed learning disability there is little acknowledgement of how culture, ideology and history have formed the conception and evolution of the field. Therefore, rather than accepting learning disability as an empirical reality, free of human interest and history, I attempt to investigate the relationship between learning disability as a discourse regime and learning disability as a school practice. The starting place for the study is the understandings of three LD teachers as read through my own subjectivity and investments as a researcher who is also a teacher and a parent.

To provide a theoretical stance for this inquiry, chapter two of the study was devoted to a critical, reflective revisitation of the history and contemporary discourses of learning disability. In so doing, the limitations of a natural science orientation are indicated. Chief among the limitations so identified is the seeming inability to develop either a valid theoretical definition of learning disability, or to provide an effective corrective treatment for the condition. Kenneth Kavale, a professor of special education at the University of Iowa, and longtime proponent of learning disability, discusses these very problems in an October, 1993 article in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*. Kavale states, in part, that "theoretical development in learning disabilities has not provided a generalized structure for viewing the phenomenon. . . [and furthermore,] the concept's lack of substance has made it possible to create new forms of learning disability that may or not be valid" (p. 523).

As an alternative approach to the objectivist, context-free methodology of a conventional natural science perspective, chapter three explored the interpretive possibilities in hermeneutic research. Because hermeneutics

acknowledges that preunderstandings and lived experiences are the conditions of any worthwhile human understanding, it is well suited for a critical, self-reflective inquiry into the meaning of the socially constructed phenomenon of learning disability.

Chapter four provided an interpretative representation of a series of conversations held with teachers of the learning disabled. Underpinning the conduct of these conversations is a belief that the lives and experiences of teachers are a legitimate source for illuminating the meaning of learning disability. The impressions, ideas and experiences of the three teacher-participants reveal a rich and intimate knowledge of learning disabled children, classroom instruction and school board bureaucracy. In short, these conversations probe what it means to teach and to be with learning disabled students on a daily basis. Coming face to face with these children, their parents and the school board experts, these three teachers possess practical, situational understandings of learning disability. These understandings largely go unnoticed by the natural science research tradition of the LD field.

What is released through the research conversations, and my subsequent reflection upon these, are local and particular understandings of learning disability. These are understandings that have been marginalized, dismissed or objectified by the detached observation, controlled experimentation and quantitative measurement that characterize most conventional studies of teaching learning disabled students. It is these understandings that have been foregrounded in this study. The teachers' understandings, of course, are not immune to the prevailing scientific discourse which surrounds and permeates the learning disability phenomenon. Nevertheless, the dominant LD discourse takes on different meanings in the context of teaching practice. The meanings and themes that are re-presented in

chapter four characterize what is particularly *present* in the local and particular situations and how this is different from the dominant discourse of learning disability. It is such meanings that disrupt the totalizing discourse of the "grand narrative" which Lyotard (1992; 1993) refers to in the critique of modernism. It is the local and particular meanings of the teacher-participants that form the basis of a radical hermeneutic critique that is now offered in chapter five.

Using the text of chapter four as a basis for discussion, in this chapter I problematize the "truth" of the LD discourse from within its own assumptions. I try to attend not only to what is *present* in the text but also attempt to draw attention toward the *absent* and the unsaid. As a way of coming to a deeper understanding of what is present and absent in the LD discourse I try to disclose what has been pushed out of sight or ignored, and to interrogate the seemingly transparent language of learning disability -- in short, to expose the ruptures and gaps within the LD discourse which go unexamined in most empirical research studies. I allow the paradoxes, inconsistencies and ambiguities to emerge from the text of the conversations in order to see how we allow a social construction called "learning disability" to cover over the deep ambivalences of how differences are encountered and dealt with in public schools. This chapter is guided by the following questions: "What is particularly gained when we classify and educate children as 'learning disabled'?" "What is lost?" "How do we determine success or failure?"

Technology as a Social Practice

The ancient myth of Prometheus indicates the ambivalence of humanity's relationship with technology. The story is told that Prometheus, the Titan, created humankind out of clay. Looking upon the creatures of his creation, Prometheus felt pity

because although he had given man a body more versatile than the other animals, man was not able to take advantage of his upright posture. What man needed, Prometheus saw, was to have the chance to develop his mind. So he decided to give man the divine gift of fire. He told the people that it was a dangerous gift and that they should treat it with respect. If they did it would be the key to much happiness. But Zeus looked down from Olympus and spotted the glow of fires, men cooking food and warming their cold hands. Some men had made crude forges, others were fashioning iron for the wheels of chariots while others were refining gold and making ornaments and coins. The fires were driving back the darkness. In a rage Zeus shouted for Prometheus. "You knew my command. Man was not to have the gift of fire. "

"Father of the gods and men," replied Prometheus quietly, "it seemed to me you would take pity on the race of men. See how much happier they are, now that they have fire."

"Maybe they are and maybe they aren't," Zeus stormed. "Now that they have this gift, there is no telling what they will do. Soon they will think they are as great as the Gods. I must destroy them, once and for all." However, shortly afterwards, Zeus had second thoughts. "I think I will have myself some sport. What I will do rather than destroy the race of men is watch them with this new plaything. Although Prometheus says fire will bring much happiness for mankind, I prophecy that it will also bring an even greater darkness." (adapted from "Prometheus" as retold by Jewkes, W. in *Man the Myth Maker*. 1981; pp. 32-36)

In her 1989 Massey Lecture series entitled *The Real World of Technology,* Ursula Franklin, an experimental physicist and professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, speaks of technology as a social practice. According to Franklin, technology is our location. In today's world, she says, "there is hardly any human activity that does not take place within its walls" (1990b, p.11). The myth of Prometheus indicates that the technology that Franklin speaks of is old as humanity itself. We can see that the ancient Greeks while understanding that the human mind and technology are inexorably intertwined, appreciated the ambivalence of our relationship with technology. Heidegger, in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology," similarly indicates this inexorable and ambivalent relationship humans have with technology when he says "to posit ends and procure the means to them is a human activity" (1977, p. 288).

A good deal of the instruction in special education is based on the theory that student learning can become a technology by being broken down into sets of carefully sequenced and easily measurable small steps. Broadly speaking, such instruction is often criticized for being reductionistic or mechanistic. (See chapter two, pp. 30-32). Although never explicitly acknowledged, many of the theories which support mechanistic learning are based on the analogy that human learning is like a machine. Just as a machine can be taken apart in order to see how the various parts function (or malfunction) in the same manner, the broad skills and abilities of learning can be broken down in order to see how learning functions.

For an example of how learning can be transformed into a mechanism, we can consider "learning to read." An educator could break reading down into components such as (a) understanding sound - symbol relationships, (b) using context clues, (c) having an adequate vocabulary, (d) possessing a visual memory and so forth. Failure to read could be identified as a malfunction of one or more of these parts. The mal-functioning part could be "extracted" from the whole act of reading, "repaired" through remediation and put back into the now well-functioning process. In this way, mechanical procedures for learning to read and for correcting reading difficulties are developed.

Recalling chapter four, Lynne, Karen and Vanore placed great value on what they called "strategies." Vanore and Lynne explain.

> Vanore: If these kids had been introduced to these strategies earlier they might not have needed special help. . . . We do a visualization technique that really helps. Most good readers visualize. These kids don't. So we talk it through with them, showing as the author introduces more information, they may have to adjust their picture, their visualization (V2, p. 10).[1]

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1 the capital letter V refers to Vanore's text, L to Lynne's text and K to Karen's text

> Lynne: What was happening here -- the kids were not getting the strategy training that I think is very important. . . . My philosophy is let's take these children, give them some strategies, put them in the regular classroom and give them the opportunity to practise those strategies. (L3, p. 3)

The idea is that training students to use cognitive processing strategies will result in their learning to read. Cognitive strategies (in this context) are essentially the behaviors we assume most good readers employ when they read. Rather than reading, per se, being broken down into hypothetical parts, the brain or behaviour of the able reader is now the focus of our attention. The teaching of strategies is essentially another mechanical model that has been translated into a prescriptive technology for the classroom. Lynne's and Vanore's words show us how "caught up" we get in models and technologies without being fully aware of it.

The image of reading as a set of mechanisms is, at best, only an approximation. We forget that no one really knows how a child learns to read. Yet such models of reading would have us believe that such knowledge is available. However, what we neglect to mention is that while the relationship of whole to parts in the world of machines can be empirically proven, the relationship is only a hypothetical one in the world of people. We mistake our hypothetical model for the "real thing": the act of reading. And we put our faith in a technology that we either forgot, or did not recognize, was devised from a hypothetical construct in the first place.

The technological relationship runs deep. This may be seen in the attempt to reject the mechanistic models of learning in favour of holism. In the latter part of chapter three, I examined the ideas of Poplin (1984, 1985, 1987, 1988a, 1988b), Heshusius (1982, 1984, 1986, 1989a, 1989b, 1991), and Iano (1986, 1990) who, in promoting their holistic models, were critical of the way

reductionistic models misrepresent learning disability. Their critiques do an admirable job of making us realize that LD is not exclusively a disability within the individual child but instead is intimately related to the historical, cultural and educational milieu in which the child finds itself. However, it is not that critique I wish to initially examine; instead it is the pedagogical implications of their theory of holism which, as Poplin indicates, has as its underpinnings Piaget's structuralism:

> (1) the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts; (2) the parts of any whole are constantly interacting and transforming one another as well as interacting and transforming each other; that is, structures are always changing; (3) structures interact and transform in such a way as to be self-preserving and self-regulating. (Poplin, 1985, p. 60)

Poplin suggests that the answer to school success lies not in breaking areas of knowledge down into parts but in "be[ing] child-centred rather than curriculum centred" (1985, p. 64). In brief, the tenets of holist instruction, according to Poplin are as follows:

> (1) because learning is generated within the learner, not provided from outside, teachers must provide the appropriate experiences at the appropriate time; (2) the teacher must also provide educational experiences that connect to each child's background and interests; (3) teachers must design environments where errors are viewed as natural and go unpunished; (4) teachers must allow the child to play and experiment with ideas; (5) teachers need to acknowledge that both they and students learn from and teach one another. (Poplin, 1985, pp. 64-66)

Although Poplin claims that she "does not value hypothetical constructs" (1985, p. 63) it seems that holism is just as much of a hypothetical construct as the mechanistic theories of learning. Perhaps holism is not guilty of fragmenting the learning process, but it is a representation of learning nonetheless. Although clothed in more humanistic attire, a technology of learning is

undoubtedly present. There is perhaps more latitude in terms of what the teacher is able to think and do in the classroom but still the teacher must conform to a theory of holism and its subsequent reduction into a holistic pedagogy, both of which have been devised outside the classroom walls.

The reason I make reference to both the models of holism and reductionism is not necessarily to condemn either one nor to elevate one above the other. Instead it is to illustrate that research on learning yields models that re-present learning. It is mistaken to think we are escaping technology in the switch from reductionism to holism, when in fact we are simply stepping out of one kind of technology and landing in another. The question is not how to get out of technology -- it is part of what has always defined us as human beings -- instead we need to be conscious of this technological relationship as part of the landscape of learning disability. We need to acknowledge that, as human actors in the field of education, we will be devising, choosing, reflecting upon and evaluating educational technologies. This we must do with the care our children deserve. We need to be especially vigilant in the field of learning disability which is more vulnerable than most to the deployment of prescriptive technologies.

The idea of "prescriptive technology" will be discussed in the next section. But before leaving this section, we need to think further of the human relationship with technology that the story of Prometheus draws us to consider. The myth of Prometheus reminds us that technology carries within it both a blessing and a curse. It both helps and hinders. Within Vanore's words we can see this contradiction showing through.

> Rillah: What do you mean when you say that some days the strategies aren't working for the kids?
> Vanore: What am I seeing? Strategies, I guess that's more like mental blocks. They can pick the strategy [but] it will be the wrong one. . .

> Sometimes, too, it's a hit and miss approach for them or maybe [they will give up] and say, "I'm not going to try a different strategy because that one didn't work." (Vanore, V1, p. 19)

In other words, strategies seem to be helping but they are not helping all of the time. And although we may wish to abandon "cognitive learning strategies" based on what we see as its limitations, this is not going to lead us out of our quandary. Whatever technique or strategy we employ, there will be both costs and benefits, either in the immediate situation or some time in the indeterminate future over which we have no control. In other words, although there may be better and worse technologies, we are obliged pedagogically to make what we consider to be the best choices. These choices involve technology because we cannot step out of a technological way of being in the world.

Heidegger tells us that everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology. This is true whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But, he goes on to say, we are delivered over to technology in the worst possible way when we regard technology as something neutral (1977, p. 288). Technology not only affects and shapes our ideas and behaviour, it essentially constitutes those ideas and behaviours. We can see that technological thinking allows Karen to demand that "[regular] classroom teachers must open their doors to LD children" (K3, p. 5); Lynne to insist that LD students "have to take charge over themselves" (L1, p. 7); and Vanore to believe that "we can find the right strategy . . . to make it work for this [particular LD] child" (V1, p. 17). Certainly one of the dangers of technological thinking is that it allows us to believe that people have the power to exert that much control over others and over themselves.

Technology is always subtly at work in the field of learning disability and although we may be strengthened by admitting that all learning models and

technologies are hypothetical and that all carry with them both strengths and weaknesses, nevertheless, we cannot allow ourselves the comfort of believing that admission is either easy to discover or easy to act upon. We must continue to cope with what our technologies give to and take away from the pedagogical relationship with young people.

Pedagogy in the Midst of Prescriptive Technology: Learning Disability and the Culture of Compliance

In the previous section I explored the nature of technology as educational practice in terms of human beings' relationship to technology, noting how that relationship is often overlooked, and how it is our never-ending task is to be always conscious and critical of this relationship. What was glossed over in this section was the difference between the technology of the "teacher-practitioner" and the technology of the "expert- theoretician." This refers to the tension that exists between practical wisdom and expert knowledge. Because expert-theoreticians are removed from the actual classroom, they are limited only to prescribing and advising teachers. The difference between these two technologies relates to what Ursula Franklin calls "a holistic technology" (not to be confused with Poplin's holism) and "a prescriptive technology." Franklin distinguishes the two by indicating that while prescriptive technology breaks something down into clearly identifiable steps and rigid predetermined steps for a person to follow, holistic technology does the opposite, leaving the individual in control of the process (1990b, pp.19-29). Prescriptive technology is planned in advance, usually by someone outside the work place, while holistic technology is done on the spot by the practitioner.

According to Franklin (1990), holistic and prescriptive technologies have their origins in the history of manufacturing. A holistic technology is practiced by

the individual craftsperson. In this case a weaver or a potter has total control over the production of a piece of cloth or a pot. Since an individual has control, he or she is able to respond to the material, improvise and make "on the spot decisions." Prescriptive technologies come into play when manufacturing requires many workers. This began in ancient China with the production of large bronze pots. Manufacturing these required a number of workers working at different stages of production. This required planning and the strict adherence of all workers to their part of the plan. In a prescriptive technology there is little room for improvisation or individual creativity.

Franklin insists that teaching, however, is not a prescriptive technology. It is like a holistic technology. She writes:

> . . . all of us who teach know that the magic moment when teaching turns into learning depends on the human setting and the quality and example of the teacher -- on factors that relate to a general environment of growth rather than on any design parameters set down externally. If ever there was a growth process, if there ever was a holistic process, a process that cannot be divided into rigid predetermined steps, it is education. (1990, p.29)

Certainly all of us who teach have to conform to external expectations to some extent, especially those expectations set down by departments of education. In my own case, as a high school English teacher, I am obliged to follow the curriculum guide and must, over the course of three years, teach students to write analytical commentaries and essays as well as to interpret a variety of literary works. But within these guidelines I am allowed almost unlimited freedom in terms of what to teach, how to teach and when to teach. Consequently, it is much more likely that my pedagogy is molded by knowledge that is applied according to the exigencies of the situation than it is by an application of pre-given,universal technical rules to a situation.

However, teachers of learning disabled students seem to be subjected far more to external control and management than are their elementary generalist or secondary subject area specialist colleagues. An adherence to outside control and inside conformity is encouraged early in a LD teacher's career, beginning in the special education department at the university.

> Lynne: Special ed. training at the secondary level is more strategy focussed than subject-centred. Teachers are equipped with techniques that are neglected in other areas of the university. (L2, p.2)

> Karen: Even the [university] instructors say the special ed. student teachers are a stronger group than the elementary group.
> Rillah: Why do you think that is?
> Karen: Because of their management training. It is what they get in special education. Ed. Psych. gives them courses in behaviour modification, really basic teaching skills. Elementary ed. is a hit and miss. In special ed. there seems to be more of a consensus about what they should learn whereas in Elementary ed. . . . they cover the content in different ways or they don't even do the same content. (K3, p.2)

This need for precision, prescription and control is just as noticeable in the schools.

Vanore: The way we explain the program to parents is to talk about it in three parts. There is self-esteem, structure and strategies. Self-esteem is important. . . and giving them structure; these kids need structure. . . They also have to learn the process, the how is what they have to take, the strategy. (V2, pp. 5-6)

Franklin suggests that prescriptive technologies require a culture of compliance. She explains:

> . . . a workforce becomes acculturated into a milieu in which external control and internal compliance are seen as normal and necessary. Eventually there is only one way of doing something. (1990, p.23)

Prescriptive technology minimizes and limits the possibilities for local decision making and situational pedagogical judgements. As a consequence a

rift develops between knowledge and experience, a separation that leads to the growth of outsider expertise and a downgrading of teacher knowledge. The teacher may begin to doubt the validity of her own immediate experiences, as Vanore appears to do here:

> Vanore: . . . when you are a teacher. . .you don't know if you are dealing with an adapt child or a learning disability that has just never been identified. . . , If we get testing done, like the WISC-R, for example, we can tell what we are dealing with in terms of potential.
> Rillah: People think the WISC-R is a pretty good indicator of potential?
> Vanore: I am not an expert. I am not even qualified to give it.
> (V1, p.15)

In many ways, we can be sympathetic to Vanore's uncertainty and doubt. She knows she is not a reading specialist or an educational psychologist, and she has been taught that these specialists are the only ones who can make a definitive judgement about whether a child has a learning disability or not.

In her concern, Vanore is acting professionally and pedagogically. But we cannot help asking the question: "What if there were no outside experts to whom to defer?" Would LD teachers learn to trust their own judgements and make decisions about children without expert assistance? Would they cease to make distinctions about who is learning disabled and who is not? Or would they make different distinctions than what the experts have given us, distinctions which may be more helpful in the classroom where teaching and learning take place? In raising these questions, my point here is not to suggest that experts outside the classroom do not have a role to play in the educational enterprise. However, it is to suggest that this role is often disproportionally large; teachers and experts alike tend to elevate expert knowledge at the expense of teacher knowledge. Consequently, fresh and original insights are lost as personal experiences are downgraded. Teachers and students, who should be at the centre of the educational experience, are moved to the periphery by the

continual intervention of experts who reinforce the sanctioned version of learning disability.

Even when teachers step out of the culture of compliance and try to question outside authority, their ideas and experiences are often discredited or discounted. Lynne, for example, was "frustrated by the fact that [she had] a child who fit the LD category perfectly to [her] mind, but didn't fit according to the school board" (L2, p. 9). Vanore was silenced by a classic bureaucratic response: "Your student may well be LD but he doesn't fit the school board criteria" (D2, p. 60). Karen, in trying to achieve a suitable placement for a few children, was told "not to get emotional" (L2, p. 5). Finally, out of desperation, she had to suppress her own expertise and involve parents who "were able to get what the kids needed" (L2, p. 7).

John Caputo (1987) in his essay "Towards an Ethics of Dissemination" acknowledges that institutional organizations (such as school boards and universities) "are usually the way to get things done, and we tend by a natural momentum to organize our practices among systematic lines. [He cautions, however, that] "any good idea once institutionalized becomes repressive and inflexible" (p. 263). This is essentially what Franklin draws our attention to in her critique of prescriptive technology.

Octavio Paz relates a wry story about the limitations of expertise in an essay called "Reading and Contemplation." This is an instructive story that contrasts the poverty of a lofty, sanctioned discourse with the richness of an engaged and particular way of knowing.

> Two hundred years ago before us and before our quarrels and questions of today, in the Tibet of the eighteenth century, under the rule of the Fifth Dalai Lama, a notable event took place. One day His Holiness saw, from a window of the Potala, his palace-temple-monastery, an extraordinary sight: in accordance with Buddhist ritual, the goddess Tara was circling the wall surrounding the building. The next day at the

same hour the same thing happened, and again on the days that followed. After a week of watching, the Dalai Lama and his monks discovered that very day, just when the goddess appeared, a poor old man also walked around the wall, reciting his prayers. The old man was questioned: he was reciting a prayer in verse to Tara, which in turn was a translation of a Sanskrit text in praise of Prajna Paramita. These two words meant Perfect Wisdom, an expression that designates emptiness. It is a concept that Mahayana Buddhism has personalized in a female divinity of inexpressible beauty. The theologians had the old man recite the text. They at once discovered that the poor man was repeating a faulty translation, so they made him learn the correct one. From that day forth, Tara was never seen again. (1987, pp. 48-49)

Teaching the Learning Disabled Child: Always Catching Up

It is in the nature of education to have a future orientation. The Kindergarten teacher must make sure that the children are ready for the more academic demands of grade one. The grade twelve teacher must ensure that the students are well prepared for the provincial examinations and make certain that they possess the knowledge and skills to succeed in advanced courses. And yet we are all aware that education is more than simply a preparation for the future. It is also an engagement in, and excitement about, the matter at hand, whether that be a discussion of the absurd in *The Outsider*, a dissection of a fetal pig or a field trip to the planetarium. All teachers know that meaningful educational experiences are leading to something else, and yet they know, too, that the pedagogical moment is all. Paradoxically, it is only when we give ourselves over fully to the pedagogical moment that we can see other moments, other ideas, other possibilities.

This is not to say that a certain degree of drudgery does not also accompany the excitement and joy of learning. It is rather unlikely that anyone would get excited about the semi-colon, the periodic table or a mathematical formula. In actual practice most educational experiences are neither exclusively laborious nor wonderfully stimulating. Writing an essay is a curious

combination of the two: drudgery, while one attends to the conventions of the formal essay, and excitement, while one creates and gives form to original and insightful ideas.

Just as the smaller educational moment has elements of both excitement and drudgery within it, teaching on a larger scale has elements of present pleasure and the encounter with difficult skills and knowledge needed for the future. A conscientious teacher is always straddled between the here-and-now pleasure and the then-and-there preparation, making sure that the experiential moment means something in itself while also preparing the child for the next phase of his or her education. The problem comes when one of these overshadows the other. This, it seems, is the case in learning disability where preparation for the future looms large in the daily activities of the classroom. To understand why this may be the case we need to consider the basic mandate of the learning disability teacher: to ensure that the LD child has the same opportunities to succeed as do his or her peers who do not have a learning disability.

The LD teacher, then, has to devote a good deal of classroom time to teaching the child strategies and skills that she hopes will be consistently and correctly applied in some indeterminate future time. This leads to a kind of hyperactivity as the teacher works harder and faster to help the student catch on and catch up.

> Vanore: It's like we are doing all the right things and it is still not happening for them. . . . The typical -- here today, and tomorrow, "did you show us this?". . . The best you can do, I think, is to expose them to as many strategies as you find helpful. . . .In a year I'm going to expose them to a lot and it's okay if I confuse them and they forget. I'm going to push them to use the strategies a lot and then . . . I want to see them using them all the time. (V1; p.18)

> Lynne: I give them double the homework. I double everything. . . . I have expectations I imagine are really unrealistic and I don't realize that

there are other things to life besides school and homework. But they have extensive training over two years.

In these two instances we see the future outlined as a seductive place: the problems and difficulties of today will be overcome, provided that we move at an accelerated pace towards tomorrow. Because time is so short and the LD child is so needy, we try to stretch the present to make up for the lost time of the past. The past itself offers nothing, only regret. We just wish we had "caught [the disability] earlier" (V3, p. 19).

But even as we encourage time's arrow to speed faster and faster the frailty of the body slows it down and gives us pause. Vanore relates such an experience:

> Some days these kids can look you in the eye and it seems like everything has gone for them. . . I don't have any answers. I don't know why when tomorrow a child tries those strategies, it does not work for him. . . . I see the frustration he is experiencing and I usually back off on those days. (V1, p. 19-20)

It is at these times when the child is singularly unresponsive to prediction and control that we see a rift appearing between what the expert has explained is required and what the teacher experiences as the result. We begin to appreciate that the student is not a machine that can be programmed and manipulated. Faced with the recalcitrance of the disability, the teacher feels helpless and she "backs off" and slows down.

It is these breakdowns of "catching up" that cause us to take another look at the frenetic pace of remediation. On one hand, it seems we have to move quickly "bombarding students with strategies" so that they can learn enough to keep up with their more able peers. On the other hand, we realize that skills and strategies are not necessarily in and of themselves educative. It is a

colossal risk we take pinning our hopes on a future where skills will come together and "things will work for the child." Yet in our urge to help the LD child succeed we try to fill up every possible instant of his life with "extensive training" (L1, p. 14). Albert Borgmann, in *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, warns that this is impossible, because life is always already full:

> [Life] is a total fabric. . . . It may contain empty spaces for inconsequential additions. But if anything is added to life that takes time, the web of life is torn and rewoven; a hole is made by the new device. Saving and taking time amounts to the same thing. A timesaving device creates a hole in traditional practices no less than does a device that devours time. (1992; p.112)

We see that in trying to save time and speed up time with some new device, like cognitive processing strategies, for example, that we actually take other educational time away from the child. Every moment spent on "training" can mean a moment lost to a more immediate and intrinsically meaningful educational activity. But to not break a hole in the fabric of the lives of children with learning disability is a colossal risk as well. Without our intervention, LD children may never learn to cope, may never meet success in the regular program.

Always catching up, to be forever poised between the present and the future, is not a comfortable place to be. This is to be pulled toward hesitation and hyperactivity at the same time. What to do? To continue Borgmann's metaphor, it is not that we should stop breaking holes in the fabric of a LD child's life. It is that we must recognize that, in so doing, some damage will always be done to the integrity of the present. In teaching the LD student it always comes down to each and every risk we choose to take, it just never gets any easier.

The Ambivalence of Accommodation: Between the Child and the Curriculum

The bureaucratic practice of inclusion or "mainstreaming" of children with learning differences is a major source of friction in most public schools. When children are mainstreamed they receive some or all of their education in a "regular," integrated classroom in addition to, or instead of, being taught in a segregated special education setting. It is the question of accommodation that is often is a contentious issue. Accommodation, in terms of the movement towards mainstreaming, may be broadly defined as the process of adapting the "regular" curriculum to meet the individual needs of special education students. In this section I do not examine the more obvious disputes associated with mainstreaming such as financial savings or lack of teacher expertise. Instead I focus on what is often glossed over, the ambivalent nature of the practice of accommodating the learning disabled child within the regular school.

It has become a cliché in the late twentieth century to say we respect individual needs and differences. "Be yourself," we tell the child, as if anyone really knows what that means. "Take the child from where he is," we tell the teacher, as if that place were definitely locatable. "Teach the child, not the curriculum," as if pedagogy is a ledger book with the child on one side and the curriculum on the other. But these exhortations ring hollow and empty in view of the realities of the classroom. These exhortations ask teachers to ignore the essential tensionalities of classroom life. The child's "self" is not an isolated individuality. "Where the child is" cannot be known with any degree of certainty. And no teacher can afford to ignore the curriculum. The deliberations of daily life in the classroom are far more complicated than what these either / or statements would lead us to believe.

The LD child certainly complicates life for the teacher: to what extent should we try to make the child "the same" as everyone else, or to what extent should we allow the child to be different? How do we decide? What do we do once we decide? Do we even have the power and ability to make the choice? And how do we know we have made the right choice?

We are able to understand how fundamental these questions are to the teaching of learning disabled students when we enter actual classrooms. Here Karen, Lynne and Vanore talk about accommodation, asking to what extent the LD child should be allowed special considerations. In so doing, they raise even more essential questions about learning disability. Karen says:

> Karen: I've had many conversations where the [regular] teachers [say],"You're coddling these kids. Why is money being used for these kids?" My response is, "I'm just trying to give them a chance. They can learn the curriculum with certain considerations. Don't they have the right?" [Some teachers] don't think they are standing on their own. But they don't have it to stand on. . . . My experience has been if the child can handle the curriculum with very few changes or considerations on the part of the regular classroom teacher, then it's fine. However, if there are many considerations or strategies that need to be implemented then you have some concern. Now the concern could come because the teachers are overwhelmed but I have a feeling that it is, "This child is LD; this child has funding, this child belongs in that program, not in my room." (L1, p. 25 & 3)

The conflict is a clear one: Karen believes LD children deserve special considerations while some of the "regular" teachers do not agree. According to her perspective, the teachers' objection is twofold. First, they believe the child is not acting independently, not doing things on his or her own, getting too much help from others. Second, they say it is too difficult for the regular teacher to make special concessions in a classroom of 30 or more students. In the teachers' eyes, accommodation is wrong because it prevents the child from becoming an independent learner, and, it's too much trouble. Given the

complexity of the classroom, it is more than too much trouble. Accommodation is, in fact, overwhelming. Karen, however, does not think it wrong or overly difficult. Why is it that accommodation is too much trouble for a regular classroom teacher and not for Karen? Why does the regular classroom teacher demand that students "stand on their own" while Karen allows "special considerations"?

Vanore and Lynne also comment on accommodation:

> Vanore: If we could just allow some room for [LD children] to answer differently, in a different manner.
> Rillah: In terms of your experience in schools, what do you see as the limits to accommodation?
> Vanore: If the accommodation is not throwing everything out of whack -- This differs if you have 30 or 200 students to teach. I guess it would be that you don't have to do a separate program but a quick thing that you could put in place. . . . Just little things we can do to make it easier for the student. (V3, p.9-10)

> Lynne: There were these two kids who had their exams scribed for them and some of the teachers thought this was extremely radical. It's funny because I haven't thought that way for years and [scribing] just seems commonplace to me.
> Rillah: Were they questioning the ethics of this practice -- that what was being produced really wasn't that particular student's work?
> Lynne: One of the boys was very bright but had trouble expressing himself orally. When you asked him a question you could see the answer was there, but it was garbled so you would have to ask him probing questions to get him to get it right. When the teachers observed this they sort of felt it wasn't quite right. (L3, p.5)

The way Vanore understands it, accommodation means "allowing some room for answering differently, answering in a different manner." It is just a little thing, something to "make it easier for the child," a "quick thing to put in place." The question here is what constitutes a "quick thing," or "throwing things out of whack." There can be a good deal of conflict around these points.

We see that Lynne's colleagues, too, are troubled with the notion of accommodation. They think scribing is "radical." Lynne once thought so as

well, but now regards accommodation as "commonplace." A number of questions arise when we read Lynne's commentary. Why do the teachers think scribing and probing questions "aren't quite right" while Lynne thinks otherwise? How did Lynne move from understanding this as radical to considering it commonplace? What kind of a move was it?

Upon reading these three excerpts, we tend to have little sympathy for the classroom teachers and the objections they raise. We don't understand why they won't make a few adjustments to meet the needs of the LD child. They appear obdurate. We are inclined to think they are lazy, close-minded, behind the times, insensitive to individual needs. But let us suppose for a moment that these teachers are right in their objections -- that accommodation is neither "quick" nor easy, that it does "throw things out of whack"; furthermore, that it "isn't quite right," that perhaps the child should "stand on his own."

The question so framed becomes one of oppositions. On one side we have the teachers of LD students, who, on behalf of the special education department, the school board, the parents (the mainstreaming movement in general) want the LD children to be able to receive at least part of their education in the regular classroom. For this to take place, certain accommodations, certain special considerations are necessary. On the other side, we have regular classroom teachers resisting special considerations, seemingly objecting to accommodation.

The issue is a complex one. In part, this is because neither the LD teacher nor the regular class teacher really appreciates the concerns of the other. The LD teacher teaches only a few students in primarily a skills-based manner while the regular classroom teacher tends to teach a content-centred course to a large number of students. The discourses that summon them tend to exclude the other. The regular class teacher, who is called to attend to the

curriculum-as-plan, views accommodation as an undue demand on the curriculum and her pedagogy. However, the LD teacher tends to see the issue of accommodation more as a technical problem to be solved --just as the students are given strategies to help them overcome their disability, regular teachers can also be given strategies to help them cope with accommodation. Thus the LD teacher tends to see accommodation as a pattern of problems and solutions:

- Problem: "The LD student can't read."
- Solution: "Find another way to assess his knowledge. Just get someone to read the test to him."
- Problem: "The student can't write."
- Solution: "Find another way to test the content. Have him draw a picture, for instance."

Consequently, the curricular goals of facility with reading and writing become reduced to the technical problem of finding ways to evaluate thinking skills and content knowledge that supposedly exist outside the world of print.

There is a deep instrumentalism in the idea of accommodation. Reading and writing are viewed simply as carriers of skills and content knowledge. When viewed in this manner, it is easy to comprehend the belief that knowledge and understanding can be extracted from reading and writing "at will," and transferred to other "media" or "modalities." What goes unexamined in this instrumentalist mode of thinking are crucial questions such as, "If a scribe is writing what a student dictates, what does it mean to write?" or "If a reader reads a story while the child listens, what does it mean to read?" and "Are reading and writing in and of themselves important ways of bringing a world into being, or are they merely means to an end?" These questions underpin the

"resistance" of regular teachers when they sense that accommodation "isn't quite right," and when they want the child "to do it on their own."

When we consider more closely what is meant by accommodation in terms of adapting the curriculum for LD students we see that curriculum, too, is often viewed in an instrumental fashion. Again, accommodation to the curriculum can be viewed rather unproblematically as a pattern of problems and solutions. Take for example the high school teacher confronted with teaching Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

- Problem: "The student can only read at a grade four level."
- Solution 1: "Don't use Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; use an adapted version instead."
- Solution 2: "Find a simpler story that deals with the same issue."
- Solution 3: "Find another play that teaches inferential thinking, cause-effect relationships and figurative language."

In a world where the curriculum content is viewed instrumentally, one selection can simply be substituted for another with little regard for the particularity of the selection itself. Consequently, the actual experience of reading *Hamlet*, for example, of reflecting upon its many themes, of feeling both illuminated and confused by its ironies and ambiguities, of savouring the poetic language, of sharing Hamlet's ambivalence -- all of this counts for nothing when *Hamlet* is reduced to grist for the skills and knowledge mill.

Certainly, regular classroom teachers teach skills, but skills not separated from context. Of course, they want students to "make inferences" when studying *Hamlet*. However, they care more about the particularity of each inference and its relationship to the play itself, and to how these relate to other pieces of literature, and to the child's experiential background. Inferential thinking is not generic. When accommodations such as these are suggested to

regular class teachers; when reading, writing and "the curriculum" are viewed in an instrumental fashion, we can understand teachers' reservations. They see something happening to the integrity of the curriculum and teaching that "isn't quite right," and they feel they must resist.

There are no easy answers here. The LD teacher wants to ensure that her students perform as competently as possible in school; consequently, she wants the curriculum adapted to meet their needs. Unfortunately, because special education tends to be more skills-based than content-centred, LD teachers can be somewhat blasé about the curriculum, using it as a means to an end. For her part, the regular classroom teacher feels obliged to defend the curriculum from what she sees as superficial and ill-conceived efforts to reform it to suit the needs of special education. Within the school context, these discourses tend to conflict leaving both parties frustrated and angry.

We are compelled to respond to these students who experience difficulty with the conventional demands of school. However, the issue of accommodation cannot be reduced to simply choosing between the child and the curriculum. It is a false choice, as John Dewey pointed out nearly a century ago in *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902). Instead, we must figure out what constitutes accommodation in given teaching situations. The limits and possibilities of accommodation must be discussed. These limits can only be negotiated in genuine dialogue amongst LD teachers, classroom teachers, parents and the students themselves. It is only when we see teaching to mean both the child and the curriculum, not one or the other, that we can made any headway in the very difficult issue of accommodating student differences.

Learning Disability and the Ambiguity of Truth

Sophocles' play, *Oedipus the King*, is a story of one man's search for his for his origins. Years earlier, before Sophocles' play begins, Oedipus had already solved one inscrutable puzzle: the riddle of the Sphinx. For that feat he was awarded the throne of Thebes.

> Now twenty years later, he is confronted with another puzzle: the question of his true identity. Once it is made known to him he is not the natural borne son of Polybos and Merope of Corinth as he had always believed, he sets out to discover exactly who he is. Oedipus is confident that his brilliant mind will "sift the meaning" of his hidden identity just as it had discovered the meaning of the Sphinx's song. What he seeks are clues, signs, pieces of a whole (identity) that has been broken. Through relentless questioning of strangers, family members and Theban citizens, he tries to fit the pieces of his life together to gain a picture of his origins, his nature, the truth of his existence. Although warned by Teiresias, the blind seer, that there are some "things that must be left locked in silence," it is characteristic of Oedipus's intelligence that it makes the world a place where the whole truth can be laid open before his eyes. He says that he "will bring the truth to light." He insists upon full disclosure, believing that truth can be brought into the open for all to see.
>
> Eventually, Oedipus is successful in his quest. His intelligence and logic succeed in "bringing to light" his life "from the very beginning." But to his horror he discovers that his origins are the unspeakable sins of parricide and incest. Many years earlier, he had, in ignorance, murdered his father Laios, the King of Thebes. Shortly afterwards he married Laios' widow, Jocasta, not knowing she was his natural mother. In the end, Oedipus brings together all of the pieces of the puzzle of his life and by so doing, reveals a gruesome truth. A truth that makes him gouge out his eyes in despair. A truth that makes him cry out, "Why should I have eyes? Why, when nothing I saw was worth seeing? I knew nothing until now, saw nothing until now." (adapted from *Oedipus the King*, by Sophocles; translated by S. Berg and D. Clay, 1978)

The story of learning disability is also a search for origins. Initially, the search for the cause of learning disability was confined to the area of neurology. Here, the hypothesis was that a neurological disturbance of some sort was responsible for the poor academic performance of learning disabled children. Later, researchers, who to some extent still accepted and worked within the neurological framework, abandoned the search for neurological "causes" and

instead, focussed on psychological and cognitive aspects of the condition. Researchers were now looking for clues in weak and poorly developed psychological processing abilities in the LD child, believing that strong processing abilities were required for the successful performance of academic tasks. Within the last 15 years, a metacognitive focus has moved into the forefront, with the suggestion that learning disability is primarily a result of poor cognitive strategies. Metacognition tries to discover which specific strategies the LD child is lacking before it begins to train the child into becoming aware of skills and strategies needed to succeed at academic tasks.

Each of these orientations posits a separate, superior realm, one which is hidden because it lies beneath superficial appearances. In the same way, Oedipus's search was an attempt to discern the unknown, the invisible in the physiognomy of the known and the visible. His task was to bring to light what was hidden about his origins. Vanore, too, talks about how important it is to discover the unknown origins of the child's disability and how easy it is to be "deceived by outward appearances."

> [One of the reasons for testing] is to rule out that they are not another label. There is a fine line between an adaptation child and an LD child and [if you don't know]. . . you would have a whole different outlook about how to treat that child. (V1, pp. 15-16)

> This could be an organization thing on [the student's part], a learning disability. . . or it could be he is just a regular student acting like this. You need to know the difference. . . . Otherwise a teacher can make an awful lot of assumptions. (V2, p. 1)

The Thebans called upon Oedipus, who is "godlike in power," to solve the mystery of the Sphinx and later to uncover the mystery of his origins. Vanore calls upon the educational psychologist and reading specialist to discover the true identity of a non-achieving child. Distinguishing particular

(LD) failure from ordinary failure requires expert knowledge, someone who can read the invisible in the visible.

Lynne also looks for the hidden identity of the LD child. She compares the unknown identity of the child to a puzzle.

> [This boy] is such a puzzle. I can't unlock it. We have tried everything. . . . He is so bright but we can't get him to demonstrate that. . . . There has got to be a key to help him. . . . LD children are such interesting problems. I see [them] as a puzzle. I always will. (L2, p. 8; L3, p. 4)

Lynne draws an analogy between the LD child and a puzzle, because a puzzle, although difficult to solve, still has a solution. The learning disability discourse, of which the LD teachers are part, has always been led on by the belief of the existence of a truth lying very near by, just out of reach. It is the nature of that (elusive) truth and human curiosity pressing for disclosure that emerges most dramatically in the story of Oedipus.

One possible reading of *Oedipus* is to see it as a tale of crime and punishment which could be applied as a warning to people working in the field of learning disability: do not, in human arrogance, reach for more than what mortals are destined to know or you will experience the same fate as Oedipus! But this reduces *Oedipus* to a simple morality play, leaving little space for the ambiguities of curiosity and fulfillment. It would make people subservient to some unknown supernatural power and subject to its whims. We would be like the Thebans who lived in fear and trembling before Oedipus released them from the mystery of the Sphinx.

A more complex and ambivalent reading sees Oedipus as both the victim and hero of illumination. Through the climax of Oedipus' search, Sophocles is able to show that the thread of logic humans follow in their search for origins and truth inevitably leads into regions which are "unthinkable" and "unspeakable." With one sudden blinding light of insight Oedipus loses his

ignorance by gaining knowledge of his origins but paradoxically he still remains suspended in ignorance with the apprehension of this truth.

In his last speech Oedipus cries out that it was Apollo who brought each of his agonies to birth. But Sophocles adds that it was Oedipus, himself, who stabbed out his own eyes because "nothing he saw was worth seeing." Apollo, the Greek god of illumination and enlightenment, lived in Oedipus. Oedipus' final symbolic gesture of blinding himself reveals what little value that illumination brought. The darkness of Oedipus' origins may have resolved itself into the light of discovery, but that illumination quickly vanishes as Oedipus once more tries to make his way in the dark,dusty labyrinthine world of the human condition. In *Oedipus* insight and blindness coincide. Where they coincide is the place Caputo (1987) calls "a moment of midnight reckoning."

> [This is] where the constructions of science grow dim and the cunning of common sense and the agility of phronesis go limp, where they wither away and lose their power. . . . There is a fine point in the mind where one is brought up short, a moment of midnight reckoning where the ground gives way and one has the distinct sense of falling into an abyss. . . . What breaks down. . . is the spell of conceptuality, the illusion that we have somehow managed to close our conceptual fists around the nerve of things. . . . This is not to say,of course, that we no longer have to do with conceptual thinking, that the work of science and ethics and of institutional arrangements of all sorts are brought down. . . . [Rather, it indicates] what is left over, the radical hermeneutical residuum which conceptual thinking and planning can never exhaust, include, assimilate. (Caputo, 1987, pp. 269-270)

If we allow ourselves to read the story of Oedipus as a story of the search for the origins of learning disability, its account leaves us chastened and perplexed. Because of his skill with hard, intricate puzzles, Oedipus was able to sift the meaning of the Sphinx. But this "mother-wit" which aided him in freeing the Thebans from slavery and ignorance was small help in sifting the meaning of his life.

There is no doubt that working with LD students is an often puzzling experience as Lynne, Vanore and Karen can attest. However, if we allow ourselves to conceptualize learning disability primarily as a puzzle, the assumption is that pieces of research can be assembled to provide a solution and furthermore, that solving the puzzle will lead to the kind of understanding we need in schools. It is this kind of assumption that Sophocles addresses in *Oedipus*.

In his rendering of the story of Oedipus, Sophocles gives us a humbling account of human rationality. Oedipus, before he blinded himself, is the symbol of human intelligence that cannot rest until it has solved all the riddles. The kind of intelligence that confuses empirical truth with meaning and understanding. His desire to know, to see the truth before him in complete illumination is not unlike our desire to find "the key to the puzzle" of learning disability. But Sophocles helps us realize that what human beings envision as the end of the search (for the origin of learning disability) instead becomes the commencement of yet another search. There is cold comfort in this insight -- acknowledging that human rationality both frees and imprisons, both illuminates and shrouds, both uncovers and conceals.

But to live authentically, Caputo informs us, one must live with unrest, disquiet, and uneasiness (1987, p. 200). To live authentically with the puzzle of learning disability means to live with the ambiguous nature of promised solutions and truths which darken the same time as they enlighten.

Learning Disability and the Language of Difference

The feature article of the October, 1993 issue of the *Journal of Learning Disability* is entitled "Dysrationalia: A New Specific Learning Disability." Its author, Keith E. Stanovich, a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in

Education, proposes a new learning disability, "dysrationalia," that he defines in the following way:

> Dysrationalia is the inability to think and behave rationally despite adequate intelligence. It is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in belief formation, in the assessment of belief consistency, and/or in the determination of action to achieve one's goals. . . . The key diagnostic criterion for dysrationalia is a level of rationality, as demonstrated in thinking and behaviour, that is significantly below the level of the individual's intellectual capacity. . . . (p. 503)

In terms of anecdotal evidence for the condition, Stanovich offers the examples of Arthur Conan Doyle "who was a notorious dupe for mediums" and Ezra Pound, who "spent most of World War II ranting Fascist propaganda on Italian radio broadcasts." He even includes Martin Heidegger among the number of "dysrationalics," who, although "a conceptual thinker of world renown, was a Nazi apologist who used the most specious of arguments to justify his beliefs" (pp. 503-504).

Stanovich's article is followed two months later by an article by Doreen Kronick, a retired professor of education, presently working as a psycho-educational consultant. Kronick puts forth a case that "social deficits [contrary to popular LD thought] are . . . [also] a manifestation of learning disabilities" (1993, p. 651) and that "the social ineptitude displayed by many persons with learning disabilities has some primary [neurological] flavour" (p. 649). In other words, "the social" is also a domain in which a learning disability can occur. Kronick mentions that Canada is more progressive in the LD field than the United States because Canada includes "social deficits" in its national definition. In addition to promoting social deficits as a learning disability, Kronick would also like to see "linguistic and pragmatic deficits included in the definition of LD" (p. 651).

In promoting these new categories of LD both Stanovich and Kronick argue that conceptions of learning disability should not be confined to the 1988 American Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities definition (see page 14 in this study). In other words, we have not yet "found" (Stanovich) or "delineated" (Kronick) the entire array of possible learning disabilities in the human population.

The increase in the number and the kind of learning disabilities is something Karen remarked upon in our conversations. She mentioned that when she "reads the literature, there is always some new word, some new bandwagon" (K3, p. 7). Although she thinks "we are in danger from the terminology" (K3, p. 7) and "hates the term LD," she still believes that "teachers must keep abreast of the new directions, the new terminology" (K3, p. 9). I have referred earlier to the "hyper-activity" of teaching LD children. What we note here in the words of Stanovich, Kronick, and Karen is a different form of hyperactivity. When Karen speaks of keeping abreast, she has a sense of urgency in her voice. In addition to trying to help the child "catch up" to his or her peers by teaching more and more skills faster and faster, she and other teachers are also trying to catch up to the "new words" and the "new terminology" in the field. Learning disability researchers and authors, for their part, seem to feel a sense of urgency as well, an urgency to complete the "learning disability project" by joining in "the search for more conceptually justified domains of learning disability" (Stanovich, 1993, p. 525).

It is the urgency and desire to achieve full understanding of the entire repertoire of aberrations in human learning that ought to demand our attention, as well as the apparent unawareness of the role that language, discourse and culture play in the production of learning disability.

What lies between the reality and the word?

In the second chapter of this study, I discussed the work of Coles(1987) and Carrier (1986, 1987) who claim that the existence of learning disability as an empirical reality is virtually unproven. To ask how learning disability, despite its "unproven status," could nevertheless, become an authoritative scientific discourse, I looked at how the concept of learning disability was able to fulfil certain educational and societal needs, such as the unexplained school failure of middle class children. I also looked at learning disability as "word realism" -- how an abstract concept like "learning disability" rapidly takes on material existence in our culture because of its scientific "cachet," how people believe that "learning disability" is a natural condition uncontaminated by interpretation, how they assume "learning disability" reflects "reality," free from social practices.

The assumption that words represent reality allows the term "learning disability" to interpret differences as a deficiency in learning. Lynne indicates, for example, that it wasn't until "the university started sorting out who was who for [her that she was able] to perceive the learning disabled student in class" (L1, p. 1). The words also tell us what to "expect" and what to "correct." Vanore suggests "that there is a fine line between an adaptation child and an LD child and [if you don't know]. . . you have a whole different outlook about how to treat that child (V1, pp. 15-16). It could be argued that it is the language of disability, the existence of LD terminology, that obliges us to find students who fit the description.

Yet in conventional learning disability discourse, there is no recognition that language is anything more than an instrument that names an objective reality. The concept of learning disability as an empirical reality rests on the assumption that LD terminology is an accurate representation of the realm of raw human phenomena. In other words, nothing lies between the reality and

the word: the word is reality. Language is assumed to be nothing more than the transparent carrier of scientific facts and ideas.

In fact, the reality that learning disability presumes to illuminate and delineate is a "hidden reality." The hidden reality becomes re-presented in the scientific language of "neurological abnormalities," "psychological processes," "metacognitive processes" and so forth. These representations of reality are deployed to identify particular aspects of an LD child's behaviour. The instances of observed behaviour that "fit" the representational scheme are deemed significant phenomena. At the same time they provide empirical evidence of the hidden reality.

A telling example of this is how learning disability theory can take a particular incident, such as a student finding it difficult to make his way around a large high school, (see Lynne's commentary on page 107) and interpret this action as a disability related to "spatial organizational ability." Getting lost is considered significant because it indicates an absence of spatial organizational ability which is considered one of the aspects of a disabling condition called "organizational deficit." Because organizational skills are essential to successful learning, we are able to identify this student as learning disabled. In similar ways, new categories of learning disability such as "social skills deficit," "dyscalulia," "dysrationalia" make their way into the professional language of teaching, into our way of thinking about children, into our methods of devising educational technologies, and into our pedagogical relationship with young people.

The point here is not to suggest that the scientific voice cannot offer significant contributions to schools in terms of dealing with student differences. The point is to suggest that a fundamental weakness of science is its failure to reflect upon its methodology and to examine the crucial role that language

plays in the production of meaning. The failure to do so is what causes Usher and Edwards in *Postmodernism and Education* (1994) to say that "science deceives, not because its outcomes are necessarily false, but because it cannot 'come clean' about itself" (p. 74). Because science cannot do this, according to Usher and Edwards, its way of speaking "becomes oppressive" (p. 74). Thus, because of its non-reflexive nature, conventional LD discourse is unable to consider the idea that the category "organizational deficit" says as much about the culture that created the label as it does about the child that carries this definition.

Learning disability and the desire for control

Karen commented that teachers have to work hard to keep up with the new words and the new terminology in learning disability. Researchers too, of which Stanovich and Kronick are representative, are also kept busy devising and testing new theories, and composing new terminologies. Many of these "bandwagons" as Karen calls them, fade into obscurity (such as dysfunctional laterality and visual-motor perceptual lag, for instance) because they cannot muster enough support in the scientific world, the parent community, or because they cannot be easily operationalized in school situations.

A "delirium of change" has defined the LD discourse in its thirty year history where new orientations have ousted the ones preceding them. Languages proliferate and the field grows. Kronick's and Stanovich's "new" disabilities of social skills deficit and dysrationalia are just two examples of the growth in learning disability. On one hand, the growth seems perfectly reasonable. It seems that for every "ability," there should be its converse: a "disability." On the other hand, to create this multiplicity of human deficit categories, to assign certain individuals the labels of "dysrationalic" or "socially

disabled," for example, stretches the credibility of science. According to Usher and Edwards, this proliferation of names relates to a "suppressed desire in science" (p. 37) . This suppressed desire is "to attain full and complete knowledge, to be not-lacking or complete through the elimination of otherness" (p. 38).

The desire "to attain full and complete knowledge . . . through the elimination of otherness" appears in the way the language of learning disability functions. "Dysrationalia [as] the inability to think and behave rationally despite adequate intelligence" (Stanovich, 1993, p. 503), indicates a desire to eliminate forms of thinking that do not coincide with "acceptable" conclusions. Social skills deficits operationally defined, in part, as "pragmatic deficits in conversational competence" (Knonick, 1993, p. 650), announces an intention to control standards for correctly conducting conversations. Vanore expresses this kind of control in the application of learning disability concepts in the classroom: "The research says that our kids are not doing the metacognitive, that conscious awareness kind of questioning that you and I automatically do. . . . By doing the problem solving, we are giving them the metacognitive. We want them to start thinking out loud, verbalizing what they do" (V3, p. 13). Without realizing it, Vanore is eliminating other possibilities of relating to personal thinking processes.

Ironically, the desire to attain full and complete knowledge will always remain unfulfilled. There will always be aspects of the person that resist categorization, elements of human nature that refuse to be pinned down, and particularities and peculiarities that cannot be contained in catalogues and nomenclatures. The desire for mastery remains forever unfulfilled not only because there are limits to what can be known by rationality and method but also because of the nature of language itself. Language as a signifier can

never be firmly attached to meaning. In the words of Lacan "the signified always slides beneath the signifier."

> It is in the chain of the signifier that meaning 'insists' but none of its elements 'consists' in the significance of which it is at the moment capable. We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier. (Lacan,1977, p. 153 quoted in Usher and Edwards, 1994, p. 65)

Language constitutes meanings, rather than representing reality, and those meanings cannot be stable, because of this relationship with language. And because we cannot get outside of language, we are caught in a "dialectical and changing relationship between [ourselves] and that which [we] know" (Usher & Edwards,1994, p. 58).

To acknowledge that learning disability is not simply a representation of the world, but to acknowledge, instead, that it belongs to a discourse which constitutes the world in a particular way through language is not to say that learning disability is without meaning in our culture. However, understanding that language is constitutive of meaning allows us to recognize that meaning is not a fixed reality. It is but one version of reality, a meaning that is never final but always in progress. The constitutive nature of language also allows us to appreciate the necessity for constraint in the proliferation of learning disability, because we understand that desire for naming is related to the desire to eliminate otherness. And, because of the nature of language, the desire will remain unsatisfied.

The absent and present in learning disability

Jonathan Culler (1982), in his essay "Institutions and Inversions," discusses how a deconstructive analysis is able to question the supposed neutral framework of institutional practices and discourses. In the following

excerpt from that essay, Culler, using the example of Freudian deconstruction, shows how all binary oppositions involve a value-laden hierarchy with one element being given priority over the other.

> Freud begins with a series of hierarchical relationships: normal/pathological, sanity/insanity, real/imaginary, experience/dream, conscious/unconscious, life/death. In each case the first term has been conceived as prior, a plenitude of which the second is a negation of complication. Situated on the margin of the first term, the second term designates an undesirable, dispensable deviation. Freud's investigations deconstruct these oppositions by identifying what is at stake in our desire to repress the second term and showing that in fact each first term can be see as a special case of the fundamentals designated by the second term,which in this process is transformed. Understanding of the marginal or deviant term becomes a condition of understanding the supposedly prior term. (Culler, 1982, p. 160)

Following Culler we might see that an assumption of learning disability theory is that the grounding force of disability is situated in the superior term "ability." This means we assume that "ability" precedes the notion of "disability" -- that it comes first in a sense -- and that "disability" is simply a negation or disruption of the already present "ability." Viewed in this manner, ability is believed to be independent of disability, an essence that can be conceptualized as pure "presence." Disability, on the other hand, is conceptualized as a lack of ability, an absence of the presence of ability. There is a conviction that the word ability is the sign of a real substance, existing apart from language, what Derrida (1982) calls the metaphysics of presence.

However, Culler's example of Freudian deconstruction problematizes this notion. Deconstruction shows us that there is no way for us to know ability apart from its absence: disability. Ability, which is proposed as the "origin" of disability is, in fact, dependent and derivative upon disability in ways that deprive it of full presence. Consider, for example, an act as ordinary as two children learning to read. One child reads a story with no difficulties, no

problems, no errors. However, let us say that the other child does have difficulty; he makes mistakes and there are many errors in his reading. Because of the errors the second child makes, we are able to say what errors the first child did not make. It is at this point that the absence of errors in the first reading act may be transformed by someone into objects of knowledge (pure presence) such as *phonological awareness* and *contextual understanding*.

In this way, we can see that ability which is proposed as a particular instance of pure presence, is instead an effect of absence. What we are left with is the paradox of presence being a condition of absence. Because learning disability is considered the lack of something that presence thinks it has, but because presence is also dependent upon absence for its meaning, the scientific goal to identify disability outside of its own presence is a futile task. Ability only appears in the face of disability. Meaning is the result of the relation between the two. Therefore, the meaning of ability and disability does not exist as an unchanging empirical reality outside of the relationship but instead is always coming into being within it.

Caputo (1987) tells us that the function of "deconstruction . . . is to complicate things, . . . to show that things never are what we say they are, that they do not have pure and unambiguous presence" (p. 249). Derrida adds that deconstruction "teaches science that it is ultimately an element of language, that the limits of its formalization reveal its belonging to a language in which it continues to operate despite its attempts to justify itself as an exclusively 'objective' or 'instrumental' discourse" (Kearney, 1984, p.115). What deconstruction does not do, however, is lead to a brave new world where there are no binary oppositions. Probably all the thinking that we do necessitates making distinctions and setting up hierarchies. But a deconstructive analysis of the language of learning disability also shows that we are motivated by "a

logocentric desire for a fixed origin or centre, an absolutely stable ground which can serve as the basis for permanent hierarchies and rigid boundaries" (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 147).

Caputo (1987) also tells us that deconstructive criticism belongs to the very makeup of radical hermeneutics because radical hermeneutics involves a readiness for the anxiety and ambiguity that a deconstructive analysis brings (pp. 146-147). Deconstruction, in Caputo's view, is able to expose the "dismissive and exclusionary gestures that tend to characterize the ruling discourse" (p. 196). What a deconstuctive move does as we inquire into the meaning of learning disability is indicate that no one discourse occupies a privileged place of insight. Deconstruction opens up the possibility for the release of other meanings.

Some Concluding Remarks

What I have attempted to do in this fifth chapter is put into question the presuppositions at work in conventional learning disability discourses. Chapter four moved away from the traditional sites of knowledge generation in the learning disability field in order to investigate classroom teachers' situational understandings of learning disability. In so doing I was attempting to counter the authoritative interpretations of the more dominant LD discourse by offering my hermeneutic interpretation of teachers' situational meanings. Chapter five has been an attempt to critically reflect upon those meanings through a radical/hermeneutic interpretation of the conversations and selected textual materials related to the field of learning disability. Chapter six will attempt to discern possible applications of this study.

Epilogue

Pedagogical Considerations

John Caputo, (1987) in making reference to Kierkegaard's contribution to radical hermeneutics, distinguishes two interpretive movements: recollection and repetition. Recollection, according to Kierkegaard, is a turning back to recover meaning that has been there all long. Repetition, on the other hand, is a "remembering forward," a movement which tries to bring forth something new. Both are hermeneutic moves of interpretation. Both remember and reflect but while recollection seeks to interpret by circumscribing human action and stopping the movement of time, repetition, accepting that the actuality of life is continually unfolding, tries to remain open to new possibilities.

In terms of this study, a movement of pure recollection -- a statement of conclusions or a summary of my personal reflection upon the writing of the thesis -- would risk arresting the play of meanings that have been released in the research conversations and my hermeneutic reflections upon them. A recollective summary would, in effect, bring closure to the ambiguities and the undecidables of learning disability that have been surfaced in this study.

Trying to press forward rather than simply retracing my steps through the various chapters of this thesis, I offer this epilogue which, in Caputo's words, attempts to be a "creative production which pushes ahead, which produces as it repeats, . . . which makes a life for itself in the midst of the difficulties of life (1987, p. 3).

The epilogue itself consists of four short sections:

1. The first section, entitled "Schooling and Difference" tries to consider the pedagogical significance of this study. It is a re-visitation of the cultural and historical milieu of learning disability.

2. We are reminded that the welfare of children continues to be at the centre of this study. The second section deals with pedagogical considerations.

3. Next, in an attempt to preserve the ambivalent and undecidable aspects of learning disability which have surfaced in this thesis, I introduce the idea of the "pharmakon." A pharmakon, which as a medicinal potion holds the capacity to do good or evil, seems to have an uncanny resemblance to the idea of learning disability which, on one hand, helps children who learn differently than expected, but, on the other, also "poisons" difference.

4. Finally, by way drawing the study to a provisional close , I offer a number of pedagogical considerations. These considerations are presented in the form of the paradox of the pharmakon. They do not explain or solve the problem of learning disability, rather they are an "attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life" (Caputo, 1987, p. 1).

Schooling and Difference

Public schooling has not been defined by a central interest in individual student differences. By necessity and by design schools give attention to similarities and commonalities among students. Administrative thinking is directed towards the efficient operation of large schools which have to contend with provincially mandated curricula, large numbers of students, large class sizes and external assessment. As a result, most curricular and instructional planning and organization is done with the greatest number of students in mind. Given the inherent differences among children, there will always be a number of students who are unable to "keep up" with their peers. One way the school has

dealt with this "problem of difference" is through the classification of students into categories of deficiency and exceptionality under the aegis of special education. Learning disability is one of the categories of deficiency under special education.

According to Carrier (1986, 1987), and Sleeter (1986, 1987), one of the central reasons learning disability appeared on the educational landscape in the 1960s was to provide an explanation for the non-achievement of middle-class children. Parents wanted their children to succeed in school and psycho-educators offered a scientific explanation to account for the academic difficulties these children experienced. Over the years the composition of the LD group has changed to accommodate more working class children but the classification still seems to have a preponderance of middle class children.

The discourse of learning disability that has grown up around the problem of dealing with learning differences in schools has always considered a learning disability to be a natural deficiency peculiar to individual children, a deficiency that exists apart from the culture in which it makes its presence known. However, in its thirty year history, the LD research community has been unable to supply an adequate explanation of learning disability that can be empirically verified (Coles, 1987; Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1983, 1987). At least one of the results of the failure to achieve solid empirical status has been a major discussion in the field about whether learning disability should be considered a concept or a category (Kavale, 1993). Howard Adelman, a professor of psychology at UCLA says that learning disability has been found wanting in both instances. "As a concept, LD has been elusive; as a category, it has been polymorphous" (1992, p. 17). As the debate persists, researchers continue to look for scientific proof of the condition, while others search for new forms of learning disability, and other researchers conduct controlled

experimental studies to determine the efficacy of certain educational treatments.

In the meantime there is still the actuality of a group of children in our schools, that have been classified according to a hypothetical construct, receiving certain types of modified instruction. What we do not know is whether or not there have been any long term academic benefits for the children classified as learning disabled. We do know that the favoured type of intervention has been a skill-oriented cognitive and metacognitive approach to instruction. However, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that this kind of differentiated instruction has any long-lasting effects (Poplin, 1985).

This study has approached learning disability from the vantage point of the situational understandings of three teachers of learning disabled students. Accepting that learning disability, regardless of its shaky empirical foundations, continues to flourish as both a concept and category in our culture, the study has inquired into the meaning of learning disability as school practice. The teachers' lived experiences with learning disabled children provide participants' understandings of the details of school culture and pedagogical practice that go unexplored in most empirical-analytic research. Teachers' ideas and impressions are significant because of the situated insights they bring to the question of learning disability. Their understandings are also valuable because these understandings open up a space to question the applicability of the theoretical constructs in learning disability and the relationship of these constructs to pedagogical practice in schools. It is the teachers' understandings, re-presented in chapter four, as well as an extended reflection upon their meanings, in chapter five, that form the basis for the "pedagogical considerations" that are offered at the end of the epilogue.

Considering the Child

Since the significance of this study depends upon its application in the practical, lived world of teaching and learning, the meanings that surface in the study must be considered with a degree of care and caution. Thought must be given to the welfare of the child labelled as learning disabled who is at the centre of this inquiry. Attempts must be made to regard the child in attentive and solicitous ways. In other words, the pedagogical significance will require due "consideration."

One particular, concrete "moment of consideration" that I remember quite vividly was the time Vanore noticed the frustration and confusion "written upon" a child's face when he was working on metacognitive strategies. The pain and frustration that Vanore saw in the child's eyes caused her to pause for a moment. She paused to "consider" the pain and distress of the child immediately in front of her, carefully weighing this pain and distress against the promised benefits of the metacognitive regimen she was following. His eyes met her's and it was at that moment that she decided to "back off" and to stop "pushing [the child] to use strategies."

Just as Vanore paused to consider before moving ahead, the epilogue of this study is also a pause for consideration. The word "consideration" comes from the Latin, *considerare*, which literally means "to observe the stars." Consideration is not a detached speculation, however. Instead, it implies thoughtful reflection, attentive contemplation, and continuous and careful thought. When adopting an attitude of consideration a person slows down to ponder, to think again with care and caution before moving forward.

We are reminded that pedagogical understanding not only implies a thoughtful and reflective *Dasein* -- being-in-the-world but also a responsible and caring *Mitsein* -- being-in-the-world-with-others. Gadamer helps us

understand the full significance of pedagogical understanding by proposing that understanding and application of that understanding, rather than being separate steps in hermeneutic interpretation, are inextricably intertwined in the same pedagogic movement. In other words, only by being addressed by the pedagogical responsibility that accompanies understanding can we say that we have considered the educational significance of a study.

The Pharmakon of Learning Disability: A Consideration on Ambiguity

In the *Phaedrus*, which has to do with the art of making speeches, Plato introduces writing as a "pharmakon." A pharmakon indicates both a remedy and a poison in medicine (Cobb, 1993, p. 143). In the *Phaedrus,* it is told that writing was offered by its inventor, Theuth, as a remedy for forgetfulness to Thamis, the king of Egypt. However, Thamis saw it as just the opposite, believing that by placing their trust in the external marks of writing, people would stop using their own internal capacities (Cobb, p. 132).

The pharmakon thus has a striking ambiguity, it has a power that can work either good or evil. The pharmakon has no single or determinate character, but instead holds within it the possibility of both remedy and poison. The concept of learning disability takes on the quality of a pharmakon in the sense that it has both necessary and dangerous aspects to it. Furthermore, in its promulgation it is difficult to sort out just what is remedy and what is poison. It is the ambivalent, undecidable character of learning disability as pharmakon that deserves our consideration when we speak of the significance of this study to education.

Pedagogical Considerations

1. The words learning disability bring an awareness that there are significant and profound differences amongst children. Once we become informed that certain children are "learning disabled" our eyes are opened to differences we might not otherwise have considered.

However, because we tend to frame our thoughts through hierarchical oppositions, difference is reduced to a "lack" of ability. As a result, the complexity of difference, the mystery of the other, fades away under the primacy of the privileged term, "able." As a consequence, all we are left with is teaching the dis-abled child to be able, "like-us." The language brings an awareness of difference but the fixity of language also limits our understanding.

2. Conferring the label, learning disability, upon an individual can instill the person with courage and hope. In two very moving autobiographical stories, Sandi Dorn (1995) and Margaret Stolowitz (1995) describe the relief they experienced when they were told there was a name for what they had: attentional deficit disorder. Before they were diagnosed they felt "stupid" and "dumb," but after their diagnoses they felt they had the strength to go on.

On the other hand, the label can also produce fear and despair in the person upon whom it is conferred. In our first conversation, Karen said the label of learning disability brought "insecurity," embarrassment" and "anger" to the children in her program. The LD children felt "less worthy than regular students," they "carried inside [them] the feeling of inferiority." They were "broken children" whom she had to console and repair (K1, pp.10-13).

3. When a child is classified as learning disabled, he or she receives extra funding. This funding is necessary to defray the costs of remedial and compensatory services such as small class sizes, modified instructional materials, special considerations including scribes and readers, professional educational assessments, all of which are considered essential to the educational well-being of the child.

Because the LD child receives additional funding, hence receiving special considerations other children do not have, the regular classroom teachers feel they are under few obligations to provide additional accommodations for the child. Funding absolves them of pedagogical responsibility.

4. In order to be considered learning disabled, a student must be assessed by a school board psychologist or reading specialist. With the label comes the funding that is necessary for remedial and compensatory services.

Unfortunately, learning disability is a category of funding as much as it is a conceptual category. Because there are only "so many labels given out" (K2, p. 5) other deserving children are unable to receive the funding they so desperately need. The "all or nothing" definition helps some children while it hinders others.

5. Small, focussed classes provide LD children with extra help and specially designed instruction from a special education teacher. Without this extra assistance and skills-based instruction, the children could fall further and further behind their peers. Many of them would undoubtedly experience failure and frustration in the regular class program.

Unfortunately, the time involved in "catching on and catching up" is time taken away from "regular" curriculum continuity. As a result, the LD child loses the richness and depth that are an integral part of education. Depth of knowledge and complexity of understanding are often sacrificed for growth and development of skills.

6. In regular classes, most teachers do not have the time or opportunity to give the LD child the help that is necessary. The segregation of LD students in self-contained classrooms, on either a part or full time basis, offers children the intense and close attention they need. The teacher to student ratio is low, usually one to 10 or 12. Furthermore, in a segregated, safe environment where LD children are grouped together, there exist opportunities for comradery and friendship. Feelings of inferiority and frustration that develop because of the demands of the regular program are often reduced in a segregated setting.

Although the segregated setting for LD students has benefits, it has costs as well. LD children often feel the "shame" and "stigma" (K1, p. 28) of being removed from the regular classroom and taken away from their other friends and classmates. Gathered together as a group of special learners, they lose the amorphous identity of "student" and take on the restrictive identity of "learning disabled."

7. Learning disability, both in terms of its conceptual and operational definitions, attempts to bring the child to normalcy, to restore ability or sameness. The humanitarian reason for the move towards "equality" is to ensure that LD children have the same opportunities to achieve in schools and post-secondary institutions as do their peers.

As noble and humanitarian as these goals and efforts may be, they, nevertheless result in a kind of forced equality, where individual differences are devalued and suppressed. Equality then becomes synonymous with uniformity. The individual liberty of the child is sacrificed in the name of equality and the benefits that equality promises to bring.

8. The most recent move in compensatory instruction for LD students is metacognitive process-based instruction. The hope is that in becoming aware of underlying cognitive processes common to successful learning, learning disabled children will be able to take charge of their own cognitive functioning and thereby increase their chances for academic improvement. Such a move towards process learning and student independence seems a liberating act. Learning disabled children are introduced to cognitive processes that successful students automatically employ. They are encouraged to make this

knowledge their own through metacognitive strategies and then are allowed to choose correct strategies to employ in particular situations.

Unfortunately, the tenets and practices of metacognition set up a kind of mind-matter dualism. Metacognition encourages children to believe "the mind" is separate from "the self". Children are asked to regulate and control their own behaviour, conduct and thoughts; consequently, they come to see themselves composed of parts, parts over which they can exert control. Metacognition allows children to think that each individual has an unlimited ability to conquer and bring under control "disparate", "deviant" and "disabled" aspects of the self.

9. As a categorical and conceptual term used to describe and define student deficiencies, "learning disability" brings much needed help to students who experience academic failure. Parents know this only too well: no label, no funding; no funding, no assistance; no assistance, no acknowledgement of individual differences. Parents, teachers, researchers and other members of the LD community have been quite successful in acquiring help for under-achieving children through and with the definition of learning disability.

Unfortunately, the help exists almost exclusively in (1) the form of medical reasoning: diagnosis, treatment, cure; and (2) scientific rationalization: abstracting the problem, severing it from its context, reducing it to its simplest parts, and re-forming the parts into a hypothetical whole. It is difficult to dislodge these two powerful discourse regimes from their positions of power and authority. Consequently, our understanding of student differences is limited because we find it difficult to imagine other possibilities.

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Appendixes

Appendix A, Part One -- Introductory Letter to Teacher-Participants

June 13, 1990

Lynne Carter
Harold McArthur High School

Dear Lynne,

Thank you for agreeing to become a participant in my research study. I enjoyed our initial conversation and feel that your contributions will be extremely valuable to me as I inquire into the meaning of learning disability.

As I mentioned when we first met I plan to have three to four conversations with you, each of approximately one hour's duration. The meeting times will be mutually arranged by us. All conversations will be tape recorded and transcriptions will be shared with you as soon as possible after each conversation. My written interpretations will accompany these transcriptions along with a list of possible questions for subsequent conversations. Your anonymity in this research study is assured. And of course, if you wish to withdraw from the study at any time you are free to do so.

My research centres around the question of the relationship between the theories and literature about learning disability and a teacher's personal experiences with children who have been classified as learning disabled. I am interested in your views on the meaning of learning disability and what you see as the views of others (parents, experts, colleagues, "LD" children, etc.) in relationship to your own teaching and pedagogical concerns.

As a teacher, parent, and certified reading specialist I am interested in coming to a deeper understanding of the children we classify as "learning disabled." I am also interested in exploring the reasoning we use as teachers, administrators, parents and "experts" in making such pronouncements about these children. My own experiences with teaching and research tell me that we understand very little about why certain children experience difficulty in school and why some of these children come to be called learning disabled. In addition to my concerns about how students come to be labelled as learning disabled I am also interested in the day to day practicalities of teaching learning disabled students. This is an area that has gone largely unexplored in the literature.

I believe that through a series of conversations with you and other teachers of learning disabled students we may come to a deeper understanding of what it is that allows

us to classify certain students who are experiencing difficulty in school as "learning disabled."

I see a research conversation as having a much more open format than is the case in a standard interview situation. Since this study is to some extent collaborative research, I welcome your questions as well. In fact, as the conversations progress, I hope that we will move towards exploring mutual concerns together. In this regard, I see our discussion of any one question taking us in a particular direction neither of us had necessarily been prepared for beforehand. A whole new series of important questions may surface at this time. This is why I would like to leave the conversation as open as possible and not to reduce it to a closed question-answer format with me having the role of "questioner" and you of "answerer."

On the attached page are listed some general questions that indicate my research interests. These questions may be considered as possibilities for us in the research conversations. Some we will explore in depth; others will be modified or omitted depending upon the direction the dialogue takes us. The questions will undoubtedly be rephrased once we are actually talking face to face with one another. They will certainly not be asked in the order as given here but will, I believe, arise quite naturally out of the on-going conversations we have with one another.

Before our first conversation you may wish to highlight certain questions on my list that are of particular interest to you as well as adding questions of your own that I neglected to include. Between conversations you may want to jot down some of your thoughts as notes or in an informal journal so you can share these concerns with me when we meet the next time. As well, if you feel you want to share any particular literature with me about learning disability I would be happy to read it. I, in turn, may wish to share readings with you that I think are appropriate to our mutual interests although you are certainly not obliged to read this material. I realize your busy schedule may not allow you the time or the opportunity to devote to such reading .

Please contact me if you wish further clarification.

Sincerely,

Rillah Sheridan Carson
Ph. D. Candidate

Appendix A, Part Two -- List of Initial Opening Questions for the Research Conversations

Guiding Questions for a Dialogue on the
Meaning of Learning Disability

A. General Background Questions

1. How long have you been teaching learning disabled students? What were your teaching experiences before that?
2. What made you decide to teach learning disabled students?
3. What sort of formal education have you had in the area of learning disability?
4. What do you know of the history of LD:
   (a) in your school?
   (b) in your school district ?
   (c) in Alberta, in Canada, internationally?
5. What sort of involvement have you had with learning disability both within and outside the school?

B. Learning Disability -- School and District Policies and Procedures

6. Describe what you know of the assessment (identification) procedures for suspected LD students? Placement procedures? What, if any, involvement do you have as a teacher in the identification or placement of these students?
7. What are your views on segregated classrooms for elementary LD students and tutorial or pull-out programs for secondary LD students that are presently program policies?
8. What are your views on the integration of LD students with "regular" students?
9. What are the policies and procedures for mainstreaming learning disabled students back into "regular" classes once they cease to attend special LD classes? As a teacher, are you satisfied with these policies and procedures?

C. The Roles of Parents and Outside Professionals and Agencies

10. What do you see the role of parents to be in the education of their children who have been identified as learning disabled?
11. How do you see the following as relating to your teaching:
   (a) university courses on special needs students?
   (b) district in-service programs?
   (c) professional development?
   (d) literature on learning disability?
   (e) colleagues from other schools?
   (f) the Learning Disabilities Association?
12. What do you see the role of research to be in the area of learning disability?

D. The Learning Disabled Child in the Milieu of the School

13. Comment on LD students' initial and continuing attitudes about being identified as learning disabled students and being placed in "special classes."
14. Describe the attitudes of other students in the school regarding learning disability and LD classes.
15. Discuss the attitudes of your colleagues regarding:

(a) learning disabled students
(b) LD programs
(c) you, as a teacher of LD students.

E. The Question of Learning Disability

16. Describe some of the ways you have learned and continue to learn about learning disability.

17. In your view, how are learning disabled students different from:
(a) "regular" achieving students?
(b) "regular" non-achieving students?
(c) other special needs students?

18. Do you see your teaching to be different than that of a "regular" classroom teacher?

19 Describe the curriculum, instructional strategies and evaluation that are part of your teaching.

20. In your view, do you think students identified as learning disabled are being well served in elementary and secondary schools?

21. In your view, what does the term "learning disabled" mean? Has this meaning changed over time for you?

Appendix B -- Excerpt of the First Conversation with Karen, June 27, 1990, pp. 20-25 on original copy

Rillah: I don't think that parents know what they can say to teachers a lot of the time. Even as a parent myself, one who knows a lot about schools, I am still very apprehensive of what I can say to teachers. "What are the forbidden areas? What are things you shouldn't talk about? How can you make requests? What kinds of things can you say?" That's very difficult to know.

Karen: It is. And I think too your approach is very important because the way you approach a teacher about any condition, it could make or break what's going to happen. I think sometimes parents come in a little too aggressive; they mean well. know where they are coming from but it really sets the teacher off. And you can see the regular classroom teachers thinking, "Well. . . " And I hear the comments so I think -- But the parents I have, by and large, had to fight for many years. They learnt a lot. I also give them this manual.

Rillah: There is real resentment, I think you are correct, against parents who make their presence known and who do battle for their children.

Karen: Yeah. This should be a partnership. I mean ideally, shouldn't it? I could never do this program without them. Because of the amount of demands there are on the children and as for the parents -- for their children to be in this program -- I will be alerting them tomorrow to be prepared. I mean your year is as busy as the children's if not more. They have, of course, their other responsibilities, but-- it's pretty vital to go hand in hand in this program.

Rillah: Do you have students that are turned away because of space and funding?

Karen: Oh yes.

Rillah: So someone has to make the decisions about who comes in the program?

Karen: They gave me another one just because they -- I'm carrying 12 just because of that very reason. They just really fought and fought and my principal said, "Karen, I'm sorry but I broke under pressure." And I said, "Well, look, if I was sitting in your chair, I would have 40 in the program, so please --" I mean, so what's one more?

Rillah: You feel there are very many deserving children?

Karen: Of course. I don't believe that they would be making a case if it wasn't vital, exceptionally vital for this child. There are a lot in this school who are doing all right but just barely and struggling and working so hard. So many teachers will say to me, "Karen, that child would do so well in your program." And I have to say, "Right, let's make an application." And guess what -- their marks are too high!

Rillah: So they have to fall the necessary two years behind. So in a way they are encouraged not to achieve for a while.

Karen: Isn't that sad? Isn't that weird? Yes it is, essentially that is what they are saying. These children truly are -- and they are being picked up by regular classroom teachers, which I think is just wonderful, who are saying to me, "Look." There is one teacher in the staff room in particular who is always finding many for me. It's really special of her. And every time I'll look at the marks and say, "I'm sorry there's no way the system will even look at this because the marks are --"

Rillah: What discrepancies do they want to see between achievement and potential?

Karen: I would think -- they don't want -- I've had kids who, trust me, were so far behind -- but I would think it's two years for this program. And I don't think it would go too much more.

Rillah: I know it's two years when they were younger, that's why I was wondering if that gap widened when they got older?

Karen: No, because I think that's what happened to me last year. They gave me children who were three and four years behind grade level if not more in many areas. And that was not the criteria as it was laid out for this program.

Rillah: I thought it had to be at least two, but that's not the idea?

Karen: They didn't want it to be more than two; it wasn't supposed to be that extreme. At least that's what I understood; I don't know that anybody's clear because I get all sorts of children.

Rillah: Maybe being too clear about the criteria isn't good?

Karen: That's true.

Rillah: And again as you had said, it's very hard for an assessment team to figure out who is most deserving. Is it because the child doesn't get any extra help at home? Because some do get extra help at home. For a parent like me, middle class, who can act as an advocate -- or is it the poor child who can't get help anywhere else? It is very, very difficult.

Karen: It's really very much a program that is almost elite.

Rillah: Historically it looks that way although that seems to be changing. I know that this is quite a wealthy area of the city although you say you get kids from all over --

Karen: I'll tell you what I believe. I believe that the children who make it in this program are the children whose parents are fighters. Advocates.

Rillah: So some parents have found out about the program. They've asked to see whether their child fits the LD criteria or not. Could there be "a carbon copy" of this LD child somewhere else in the system who is not in the program?

Karen: Absolutely; many. I really do believe that for this program set up in [the school system] -- it is for the children whose parents are fighters for them. You'll have a rare occasion in the program I think that -- I can think of only one child in my room.

Rillah: Is it after assessment the choice is made?

Karen: After assessment. See, assessments come in and then placement downtown looks through everyone's and finds the top 10 that they think would benefit from the program.

Rillah: Okay. And then the other ones go to junior adaptation or back to the classroom, that type of thing? Do you think there's a lot of pressure on people who are working on assessment?

Karen: Boy, the phone calls that they must have.

Rillah: There is not only the pressure, but there's also the concern. These phone calls mean pressure but they also mean concern and a person on the assessment team has seen these parents, seen the kids, there's a lot more contact. So perhaps they feel obliged to help these people?

Karen: That's right. Because of my program -- I can't speak for anyone else's program in the system because they're not run the same. But I know my program, from my point of view, is contingent on parents' support. And I let them know that they must be ready to be there for any meetings I want. And there are a lot of them. I'm in contact with those people all of the time, you know. If it's not an evening parent meeting it's an IEP review meeting or it's, "Let's catch up on things meeting or things are breaking down, let's look at it." It's constant; the parents have to be open. I know I must be just exhausting these people; they're probably very pleased to have the summer off. I don't say that lightly; I mean it. They must understand that they are committed to this program and I don't take the program lightly and I don't think they should either. Nor should the children.

Rillah: Am I right in thinking then, that you're saying that kids that don't have this support at home might not tend to do that well in the program?

Karen: That's what I believe.

Rillah: It's not that the others are not deserving?

Karen: No, that's right, but I don't believe that they would do as well.

Rillah: Is there a place in the system where those "other" kids get --

Karen: No, I don't believe there is the programming for their needs.

Rillah: Is there anything that should be done?

Karen: Yes, I think that the whole thing needs to be looked at -- truly. My point of view is that I think our whole system has got to take a careful and a closer analysis of what we are doing with our special ed. population.

Rillah: I sense a concern in your remarks for all children who are not doing well?

Karen: You'd be amazed. I'm sure you know -- In the regular classrooms -- the children -- what's going to happen to them? I feel that what's happening is almost a laid back approach lately. I've been noticing -- Teachers are sort of like, "Well I did my part so the kids still have to jump through the hoops." And I guess maybe I

shouldn't be so critical and say, "Well I guess that's allowed -- to have certain needs," except that it bothers me. "Excuse me, I don't think that's acceptable."

Rillah: We all need a little part of that in us, I guess, otherwise you don't get through the day. You know, recognizing that you can't do everything that you want to.

Karen: You know it is difficult being a teacher of the special ed. population or identifying the special population. Because there is -- I don't know if it's resentment but I've had many conversations where the teachers view this program as mamby-hamby business: "You're coddling these kids! What are they in that program for? Why is that money being used for those kids? What are they going to do in this world anyway?" They've written them off already.

Rillah: These teachers are saying that the LD kids are not always going to have someone there to hold their hand, that sort of thing?

Karen: Right. And my response is, "Well excuse me, I'm just trying to give them a chance." Most kids -- it's a given, truly, they can learn the curriculum with certain considerations. Usually it just means a good teacher. But for our kids, that's not enough. Don't they have the right? Are we saying you can't be a part of our education system because you can't --

Rillah: -- operate independently all of the time?

Karen: That is the attitude.

Appendix C -- Excerpt from the Initial Themes of Conversation One with Karen

initial theme # 1 -- there are no "quick fixes" to help LD children experience meaningful school success

p.1 . . . there is no magic here. These children have very definite needs, very definite. There is no way in one year or two years that it's going to remediate everything they need.

p.2 I found that, for the majority of children that were placed in the program, they were not going to be in the program for a short period of time and then mainstreamed.

initial theme # 2 -- labelling a child as LD often absolves "regular" classroom teachers of feeling any responsibility towards the child

p.2 The children I received were coming out of a regular stream because the teachers could not handle the programming for them for whatever reason.

p.3 It bothered me that these self-contained classrooms were supposed to be the answer.

p.3 What eventually occurred, and I feel very strongly about this, was that the self-contained classrooms became a dumping ground for everything and anything.

p.3 I feel that these children were no longer thought to be the responsibility of the teachers but instead the "the Special Ed. teacher" and I really have a tough time with that philosophy.

p.4 The way I integrate children back into the "regular" program -- it has to be very cautious because teachers do not accept responsibility for them; most don't.

p.4 I believe [teachers think] this child has been labelled; this child is LD; this child has funding; this child belongs in that program, not in my room.

p.4 I find that it's really a cop-out when a teacher says, "I'm not trained."

initial theme # 3 -- the failure of some of these children points to a failure in the school system

p.2 Part of the problem was that the children I received were coming out of a regular stream because the teachers could not handle the programming for them for whatever reason.

p.3 What eventually occurred, and I feel very strongly about this, was that they became a dumping ground for everything and anything.

p.4 Most teachers do not accept the responsibility for children experiencing difficulties; most don't.

p.6 What I find most disturbing in a regular classroom is that there isn't any reflection on their teaching. If there is a problem, it is in the child.

p.9 Certainly I have taken kids from grade two reading comprehension into grade nine in two years. But I don't know that that couldn't have been done in a regular classroom.

p.10 We are a reading society and I know that. But the children are made to feel less worthy because they can not read fluently or as well as their peers.

p.11 They've (LD students) struggled for many years to get far enough behind so that someone will recognize their problem. I think they need this help all along.

p.11 I'm up against the fact that these children are not feeling too terrific about themselves, or school or about academic learning and all that.

p.12 That's frightening. . . that this program has to shoulder some of the psychological mess that these children have gone through -- that they are carrying.

p.12 If things had been in place for [these children] in a regular program, I believe that they wouldn't have needed this program.
p.12 [There has been] a lot of success with the LD program. I truly believe in what this program does. But, on the other hand, I really wonder why we have to have this program.
p.29 What right do we have to limit the paths that these children may choose from? We have limited them already -- these LD children. . . . They limit themselves because we have limited them.

initial theme # 4 -- even though the LD program alleviates it somewhat, LD children feel ashamed of themselves for being who they are

p.10 . . . the children are made to feel less worthy because they cannot read fluently or as well as their peers.
p.11 I have to witness broken children . . .
p.11 I have nine coming in tomorrow morning . . . and they're going to be frightened
p.11 I'm up against little children who are not feeling too terrific about themselves, with school and academic learning and all of that.
p.11 [A student I had] still carries a feeling of inferiority. Why? What did we do in elementary school to her?
p.12. This program has to . . . try to undue some of the psychological mess that these children have gone through -- that they are carrying.
p.13. The new ones . . . are very frightened. . . very insecure and very angry. . .
p.13. [They answer questions about their program] with a lot of embarrassment and a lot of humiliation and avoidance.
p.14. This program has to alleviate some of this misery that these children have been put through.
p.27 When I'm teaching a lesson they don't want the door open. They don't want the kids to see them in here.
p.28 The boy who [is receiving the academic award] for this program will not come to awards night to receive it. . . . He has come so far and yet those memories and experiences from elementary [prevent him from being able] to stand in front of people.

initial theme # 5 -- there are many different children, but only one curriculum

p.2 . . . in my mind there should have been an environment or something better than what we were giving them.
p.2 . . . the children I received were coming out of a regular stream because the teachers could not handle the programming for them for whatever reason.
p.4 If the child can handle the curriculum with very little changes or considerations . . . then it's fine. However, if there are many considerations or strategies that have to be implemented then you have some concern
p.4 . . . let's make some considerations or allow for considerations and strategies so that we are all . . . going to have the same opportunities to achieve.
p.5 . . . there was about one-third of the children in that regular classroom who desperately needed some accommodations and some considerations in terms of the curriculum.
p.5 . . . I'm confronted over and over again with this attitude: "This is the curriculum and this is what you will learn," and there is nothing else; there is no gray area, it's black or white.

initial theme # 6 -- The LD program and the language that accompanies it is intimidating to some teachers (and some parents)

p.6 I think [teachers] view the special ed. [programs as threatening to them because there is that diagnostic testing and all that lingo . . . and I think a lot of it is that they feel intimidated.

p.7 [They might feel intimidated because] of not knowing the terminology but it changes from year to year so we as special ed. teachers have to keep on top of it.

p.7 All [the label] does is intimidate people, parents as well.

p.7 Usually the initial interview, or the interview prior to placement-- with the specialists and the parents -- that kind of terminology is used and I think it really sets the parents off. It's almost an overwhelming problem.

p.8 [The labels] are not horns on your head; they're just ways for the experts to talk among themselves. That, I think, is a concern, in terms of integrating, because the teachers do feel inadequate.